

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

25th Anniversary Issue on Mothering and Motherhood

Spring / Fall 2025

Vol. 15



Oksana Moroz, Laura Bissell, Lauren E. Burrow, Tara Carpenter Estrada, Robin Silbergleid, Tammy Nyden, Ghada Alatrash, Ame Khin May-Kyawt, Zixuan Liao, Ariel Moy, Michela Rosa Di Candia, Sophie Brock and more



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Contents

“You Will Have a COVID Baby?!”: A Mama PhD Candidate’s Critical Incidents <i>Oksana Moroz</i>	9
The Remote Professor: Making Academia Work for Working Mothers <i>Jennifer M. Weaver</i>	31
Term Time: A Revolutionary Lexicon for Mother-Demics A Performance Text <i>Laura Bissell and Lucy Tyler</i>	47
Balancing Multiple Roles: The Experiences of Deaf Female Doctoral Students <i>Heidi M. MacGlaughlin, Kimberly K. Pudans-Smith, Ashley N. Greene, and Beverly J. Buchanan</i>	67
A Poet in Austyn’s Pocket: A Fantastical Tale for Mothers Who Think They’ve Lost Their Play <i>Lauren E. Burrow</i>	83
The University as a Place for Mothers: Reflections from the Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project in Brazil <i>Maria Collier de Mendonça, Carolina Dantas de Figueiredo, and Camila Infanger Almeida</i>	93

CONTENTS

- What Are We Trying to Build? Artist-Mothers in Academia on
Creating Sustainable Careers
Tara Carpenter Estrada, Audrey Hilligoss, and Sandra Houghton **113**
- Mother Is a Gendered Verb: Embodied Acts of Care in Memoirs of
Queer Family
Robin Silbergleid **137**
- Motherblame-Stigma and Institutional Gaslighting: Obscuring
Failures in Child Disability Care Infrastructures
Tammy Nyden **151**
- Visual Essay: Perspectives on Motherhood, Labour, and Emerging
Technologies
Catalina Alzate and Angelica Martínez **169**
- Diary of Losing a Breast and Reflections on Mothering as an Arab
Ghada Alatrash, Images by Marya Zarif **185**
- Preterm Premature Rupture of the Membranes (PPROM), Pregnancy
Loss, and the Choice of Motherhood
Yoonha Shin **201**
- Refugee Motherhood and Mothering: Adversities, Resilience,
and Agency
Ame Khin May-Kyaꞑwt **215**
- Mothering without My Mother: A Psychotherapist's Journey
Lea Schupak **233**
- Maternal Ambivalence and Loss in a Changing China from a
Daughter's Perspective
Zixuan Liao **237**
- Nativity as a Philosophy of Rebirth through the Acts of Mothering
and Artistic Production
Anna M. Hennessey **255**

Maternal Conversations in Paper, Drawing, and Poetry: A Changing Mother-Child “Us” <i>Ariel Moy</i>	269
Reburial of the Mother and the Horror of the Feminine in Southern Gothic Fiction <i>Kasturi Ghosh</i>	281
Mothering Performativity in Buchi Emecheta’s <i>The Joys of Motherhood</i> <i>Michela Rosa Di Candia</i>	301
Maternal Legacies: Reflections on the Life and Work of Dr. Marie Porter, AM <i>Sophie Brock, Jenny Jones, and Lisa Raith</i>	315
Notes on Contributors	331

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“You Will Have a COVID Baby?!”: A Mama PhD Candidate’s Critical Incidents

In this article, I explore a disruptive shift to pandemic instruction in March 2020 and the challenges COVID-19 brought to my personal and professional lives. I use three autoethnographic vignettes, coupled with social media posts, to answer the following research question: How did the global pandemic affect my identity negotiation as a mama PhD candidate in physical and digital spaces and my choices as a novice teaching associate (TA)? As a methodological approach, this article employs the critical incident technique (Tripp) in investigating digital identity construction through autoethnographic writing (Hanauer). The findings show that the pandemic dramatically influenced my identities as a mama PhD Candidate and TA in physical and digital spaces. Self-reflections on my digital identity negotiation during the pandemic helped me understand students’ needs in terms of empathetic approaches to teaching, engaging students in personal types of writing, and providing spaces for students’ creativity and agency. Through reflexivity, I found meaning and accepted different experiences during the pandemic. The article concludes with the pedagogical implications of the benefits of autoethnographic writing.

Introduction

Understanding the critical need to continue our efforts to mitigate the coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission, [university name] will suspend all face-to-face classroom instruction for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester and transition to offering all instruction online.

—Author’s email communication

On March 16, 2020, at 9:24 a.m., I received an email from the university president stating that all classes were to be moved online due to the COVID-19 outbreak. At first, I was happy. I thought about all the time I would have to do

my homework, write a dissertation proposal, and spend time with my family. I was also pleased to stay home to protect my family from getting the virus. However, this happiness lasted only for a day or two. As soon as all my classes were moved online, campus facilities were closed, and my interactions with colleagues and friends were limited only to digital spaces. I understood that this quarantine was the worst scenario for an extrovert like me. As a reflexive teacher-scholar, to understand and help my inner self to get through the challenging times, I immediately started to write to let my mind speak about the events. I have realized long before that English writing liberates and legitimizes me as a transnational, multilingual individual who uses English as an additional language (EAL). Consequently, this autoethnographic article is my way of interrogating my digital identity shifts in light of critical incidents that affected my life during the pandemic year. Thus, here are the questions that guided this article:

1. In what ways has the global pandemic impacted my identity as a mama PhD candidate and my pedagogical choices as a novice teaching associate (TA)?
 - a. How have I negotiated my identity in physical and digital spaces?
 - b. How have my experiences influenced my pedagogical thinking?

Therefore, this article aims to reflect on critical personal incidents from March through December 2020 that contributed to my digital identity negotiation by examining social media posts and short vignettes. In reflecting on my identity negotiation process, I also appreciated the needs of students in online learning environments, including legitimizing students' digital writing practices and validating their personal experiences, feelings, and emotions during the pandemic. In addition, this article has pedagogical value, as it examines emergency remote learning instruction and its challenges to provide possible solutions from a novice TA's perspective. Finally, defining "mama PhD candidate" is essential because I consider it central to my identity negotiation. In this article, I use this term to refer to my embodied experience as both a mother and a pregnant mother during my PhD coursework and TA employment. In addition, I use the term "digital identity negotiation" in its postdigital understanding as a fluid construct with multiple facets, with implications for identity construction in the material and digital world. The term also understands identity as emerging, (re)imagined, and (re)constructed through the interaction of ideas, experiences, and knowledge.

The Gender Identity of a Mama PhD Candidate

The pandemic period brought a flow of memes about female academics as superwomen who can juggle various tasks. However, they were also portrayed as those who abandoned their kids, work or study. Moreover, Alana Priore notes a worrying fact that during the pandemic, there were far fewer submissions to journals by women: “Women academics are submitting fewer papers during coronavirus—with some fields like astrophysics reporting a 50 percent productivity loss among women” (para. 12). Social norms suggest that women should *do more, and that translates into women having to shoulder most of the responsibilities*, whereas men can usually devote more hours to working online while their wives take care of the children (Cunningham-Parmeter). This disproportional share of family responsibilities has always been a problem, even before the pandemic. However, the pandemic brought this problem to everyone’s attention, and the topic is now being discussed more. Mothers need more support postpandemic than ever. Bonny Berry affirms that mothers are struggling because they are “mothering within a society that is misrepresenting, misleading and inadequately supporting” them (para. 10). As a mother of a toddler and an infant, a PhD candidate, a TA, and a wife, I second these challenges and would like society, as well as academia, to provide more support and understanding of the everyday realities mothers regularly face. The pandemic forced us to look at some of these systematic and gender inequity issues to transform how women and mothers are viewed.

Methodology

In this article, I use three short multimodal vignettes and social media posts related to the period or event described in the vignette. These data sources represent an autoethnographic method of inquiry to examine personal experiences of digital identity construction and negotiation in the digital and physical spaces I have inhabited or participated in. In the literature, personal writing has gained credibility as an inquiry approach to examining individual experiences (Clandinin and Connelly). In addition, Tony E. Adams et al. stated that autoethnography has allowed researchers to communicate their experience to wider audiences because “autoethnography, as a method, humanizes research by focusing on life as ‘lived through’ in its complexities, showing that you as readers and we as authors matter” (8). Genres, such as autobiographies, poetic narratives, and autoethnographies, are promoted in teacher education and teaching English to diverse learners because they can enhance their confidence as writers and engage them in critical and reflexive writing (Park, “Providing”). The autoethnographic method explores lived experiences. With the help of this methodology, the researcher can reconstruct

and analyze experiences to provide a more diversified view of individual experiences; it allows for deeper insights, interpretations, and nuanced views of the complexity of one's life and is also a radical method, since the researcher is the only source of validity of those experiences. Therefore, this type of writing demonstrates the process of identity construction and negotiation (Park, "My Autobiographical").

Autoethnographic writing develops meaningful literacy practices for language learners (Hanauer). Moreover, this type of writing can uncover meaningful literacy events connected to digital identity construction and negotiation through using words and rhetorical appeals, such as ethos, logos, pathos, and kairos. For example, Gloria Park uses narrative autobiographical snapshots to demonstrate the power of personal writing to investigate her identity within the continuum of privilege and marginalization ("My Autobiographical"). David Hanauer has expressed his emotions, thoughts, and understanding of the Holocaust by writing poems. In his article, Hanauer emphasizes the importance of poetry in articulating personal feelings of pain, horror, and fear. Finally, Carolyn Ellis and Crystal Patti have focused their work on telling the stories of Holocaust survivors via storytelling.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Carolyn Ellis and Joseph Rawicki used meaningful interviews and social media to interrogate their feelings of fear, anxiety, and isolation. Therefore, creative methodological approaches, such as narratives, poetry, autoethnographic essays, storytelling, meaningful interviews, and other genres, can uncover feelings, emotions, personal thoughts, and experiences to interrogate an individual's identity negotiation and construction. I follow the description of autoethnography by Suresh Canagarajah as "the genre can accommodate introspective research on one's memory, archival research on one's writing development, discourse analysis of one's literate artifacts" ("Negotiating" 47). My narrative autoethnography is introspective research of experiences connected to the shuttling between diverse digital and physical spaces.

Autoethnographic writing helps one understand complex facets of digital identity negotiation through reflexivity. Through my experiences during the pandemic, I understood what pedagogical choices I should make to humanize writing instruction. One of those choices was to include personal types of writings as much as possible. It is also a productive strategy to develop students' writing skills by engaging in analysis and critical thinking of their experiences. Moreover, this process develops students' metacognition and provides space for their creative expression.

Theoretical Framework

I use social identity theory (SIT) to examine how I negotiated my identity in physical and digital spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vivid from the vignettes that my identity was (re)negotiated through the people with whom I interacted. In terms of identity construction, I enacted my identity in physical and digital spaces by reacting and expressing my thoughts and by choosing what kind of persona I wanted to portray on a particular day and what type of role I performed for each specific situation, whether it was a mother, a pregnant woman, a TA, a PhD student, or a Ukrainian woman. Because of my identity's multifaceted and complex nature, I was performing them all simultaneously in many, if not all, cases. To illustrate those shifts in my identity and my reflexive process, this article uses the critical incidents technique to showcase my digital identity negotiations between March and December 2020, the pandemic period. Critical incidents are defined as events and incidents that happen in a person's life: “They are mostly straightforward accounts of very commonplace events.... These incidents appear to be ‘typical’ rather than ‘critical’ at first sight but are rendered ‘critical’ through analysis” (Tripp, *Critical Incidents* 24–25). One of the significant characteristics of a critical incident is that emotions should be evoked when the author is describing the event. More importantly, as David Tripp states, by looking at a critical incident from the past, we try to understand how we might change our present (“Teachers’ Lives” 69). He acknowledges that analyzing critical incidents “is an ongoing process in which new links can be constantly made” (Tripp, “Teachers’ Lives” 73). While the event might be perceived as typical at first, or, according to Stephen Brookfield, unplanned and unprecedented, it becomes critical to the person through analysis and reflexive process. The critical incident technique is a two-phase process. First, the person describes and produces the incident; the explanation then follows, establishing the incident's significance (Tripp).

Flowchart of Data Presentation and Analysis

Since the start of the pandemic and quarantine measures in March 2020, I began to compile a document with my autoethnographic reflexive writings about the events and incidents from March 2020 through December 2020. These nine months were marked by the global pandemic disruption in the outer world, and my inner world had a major shift: I became pregnant with my second child.

I provide a chart depicting the data presentation and analysis chronologically to visualize the data analysis process (Figure 1).

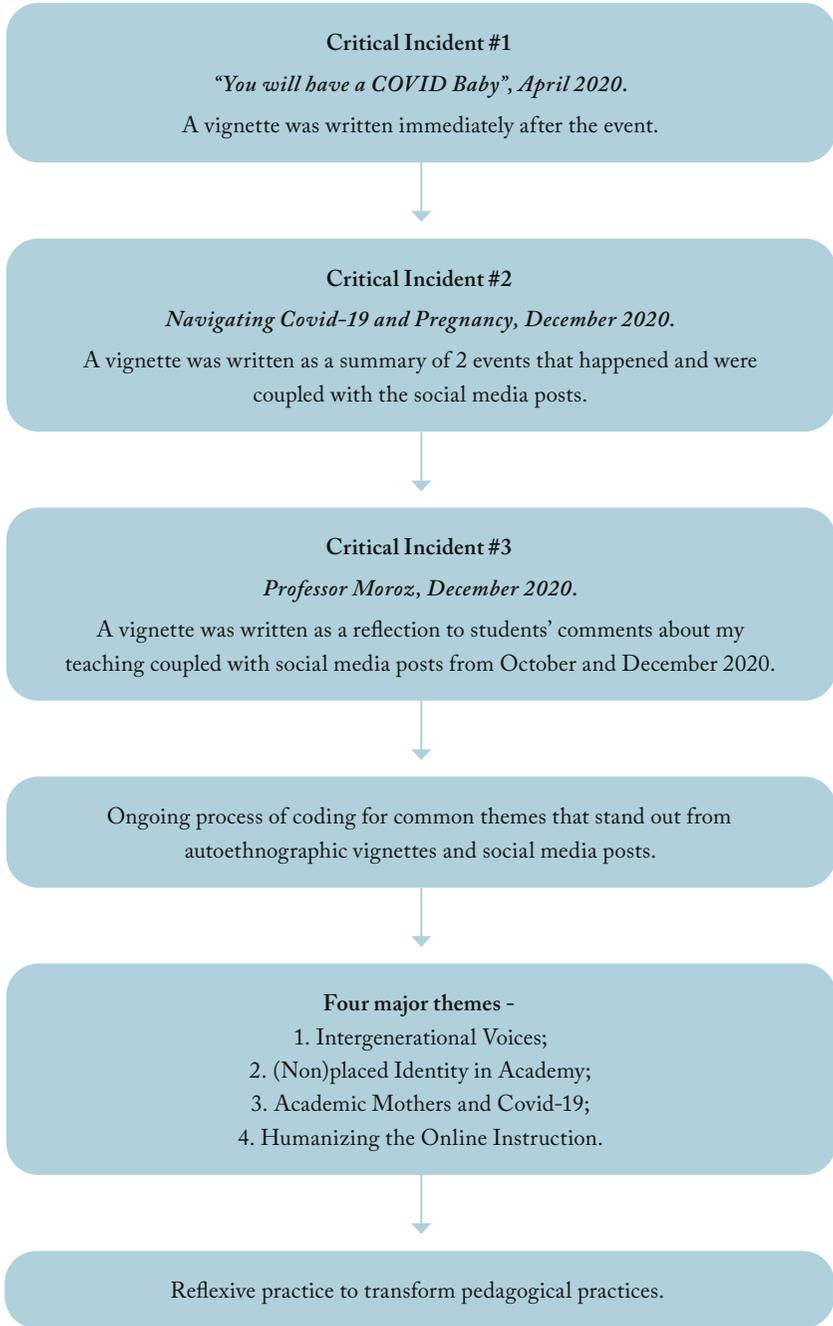


Figure 1: Data analysis process

This article examines critical incidents that led to my reflexive practices on my positioning as a mama PhD candidate during the global pandemic and later as a novice TA following a HyFlex teaching model. This method of instruction provides flexibility for students to decide whether they want in-person instruction, online instruction, or a combination of the two. Furthermore, this model aims to make both experiences equally productive for students with the help of technology.

I supplement these critical incidents with my personal social media posts, which I screenshot to add to my examination of the digital identity I portrayed during those critical moments. Next, I present those critical incidents with accompanying social media posts chronologically. Each incident has a location, the time it was written, and a title.

Critical Incidents

In this section, I discuss various critical incidents that affected my identity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“You Will Have a COVID Baby?!” Indiana, PA, April 2020

I vividly remember the facial expression of a Walmart cashier when she saw me putting a pregnancy test on the counter. Her eyes were wide open. She looked startled. It had been four weeks since the world entered quarantine because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I was getting ready to pay for the test, the lady started a small talk.

“You will have a COVID baby?!” she burst out loud so other customers could hear it, too.

I felt embarrassed and angry, not because of my pregnancy, which I was unsure of, but because my right to be pregnant during the global pandemic was being questioned. I noticed her judgmental glare (or were my hormones acting up?). I felt angry, too, because the cashier labelled my baby as a “COVID baby.” However, I pulled myself together and replied, “No, it is not a COVID baby; it was conceived before COVID happened.”

I guess the lady did not even hear or care about my answer as she continued the talk by asking when the baby would be born and whether I planned to name the baby COVID or coronavirus. At that point, I quickly took my change and hurried to leave without saying a word.

Navigating COVID-19 and Pregnancy as a Novice TA, Indiana, PA, December 2020

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I applied to be a TA at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Little did I know then how my life would change in the next nine months. Due to my status as an international student, my employment options were limited to on-campus jobs only. I knew that working as a TA

would be my family's only source of income for the next academic year. However, that prospect was not guaranteed. Due to significant cuts at the university, the department was unsure how many TA positions would be offered. When I learned I was among four people who got the positions in August, I was delighted but worried, as I was already five months pregnant with my second child. Unfortunately, at that time, I also learned that my grandmother passed away in Ukraine due to COVID-19.



Figure 2: Facebook Post One

Note. Translation from Ukrainian to English: Yesterday, August 15, my grandmother, Moroz Olga Mykolaivna, died. A farewell will take place in the Municipal House of Mourning on Pobutova Street, 3 (formerly Rebeta Street). The memorial service will be held at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, August 16, and the funeral at noon on Monday, August 17.

Text on the image: Memory eternal...

Just a week before the start of the Fall 2020 semester, my university announced its plan to utilize a HyFlex teaching model, which meant that only first-year students would attend face-to-face classes, while other students would be online. I was assigned to teach two sections of the Composition I course,

which meant that I had to come to face-to-face meetings twice a week and risk not only my health but also the health of my unborn child. The classes were going well, but I constantly felt scared to read weekly statistics of infected students on campus.

When the first student in my class emailed me about testing positive for COVID-19, I took the initiative and moved all classes to remote instruction around October 2020. As I started to worry about my health, and, more importantly, my due date was near, I decided to contact my department and inquired whether TAs had any benefits in case of sickness. Regrettably, I received a troubling response that vividly portrays how poorly TAs are positioned within the ivory tower’s structure: “Per the Human Resources office and the Benefits Manager, teaching associates are not eligible for any benefits.” Since there was no support from the university, I scheduled the entire class content ahead of time just in case my delivery did not go as planned. I was also lucky to have a supportive TA mentor willing to substitute teach for me in case I were to deliver during the time of classes.

When I think back to all the events that happened in the fall 2020 semester and the perfect timing, I think my grandmother was the one to arrange it all from above. My son was born during the Thanksgiving break, which allowed me to have some time off teaching and recover for a few days.



Figure 3: Facebook Post Two

Professor Moroz. Indiana, PA, December 2020

I question my career choices every single day. When I see the struggle other professors are going through to get their tenure and fight against injustices, I immediately feel that I do not want to be part of this drama. I often regret spending time still studying when my classmates back in Ukraine are government officials, business owners, and IT personnel making thousands and thousands of dollars more than I do. During these moments of self-doubt, I try to remind myself what my end goal is. It is not selfish or personal. It is instead a goal for my two kids to live better lives than what I could have given them in Ukraine. I realized that earning a PhD in humanities and applied linguistics is not about financial stability; getting me out of my comfort zone is a constant challenge, as there is nothing stable in this profession. I still try to cheer myself up by saying that what I do matters because I practice teaching what I preach in research.

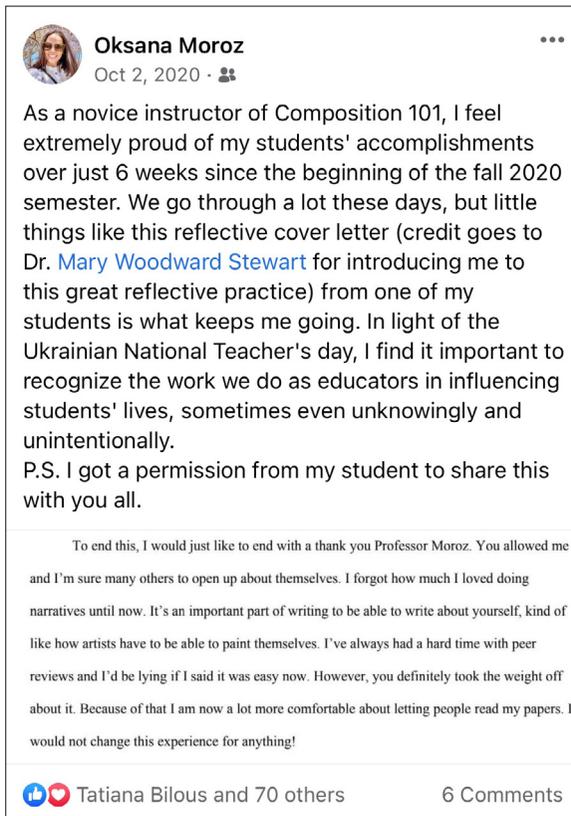


Figure 4: Facebook Post Three

In 2020, I, for the first time in my life, was addressed as a professor. I felt the respect and gratitude; it was an incredible feeling. One particular student I will remember forever. She was always sitting at the first desk, looked distracted during class, and I thought she did not care about writing at all. Her assignments were okay; she submitted everything on time but never went an extra step to reach that A level. I would point to her if somebody asked me to provide an example of a disinterested student. I was shocked to receive a reflective letter stating how she appreciated my class and my dedication to students. I had to double-check whether she indeed wrote this letter. I could not believe my eyes. This was an important learning lesson for me. “Don’t judge the book by its cover,” as they say, right?

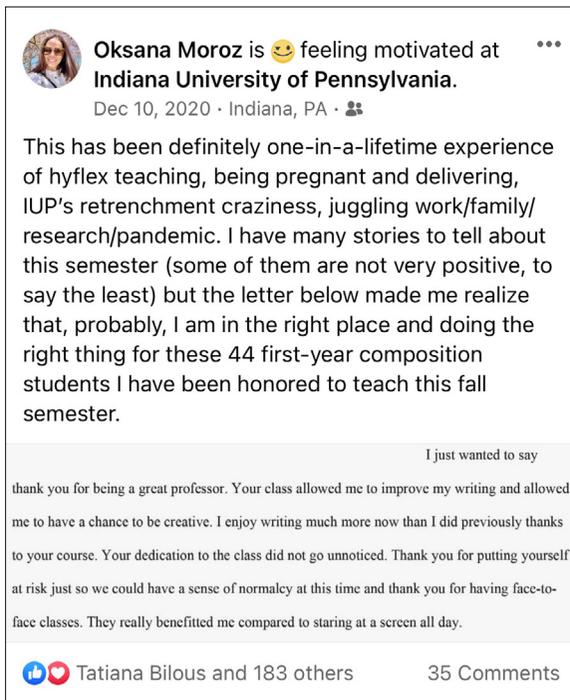


Figure 5: Facebook Post Four

Discussion and Findings

The three critical incidents described above during the pandemic present my vulnerable identity negotiation as a mother and instructor. While they seemed like smaller, insignificant events, they gained importance through my reflexive process (Cunningham). Those events were critical to me because of the meaning attached to each event and the learning experience of reliving the event and thinking critically about its further outcome. It is also evident from those critical incidents that my personal and professional lives became intertwined even more during the pandemic. The disruptive global shift to online instruction made me engage in a reflexive process to interrogate diverse experiences that affected my identity in digital and physical spaces. The critical incident technique helped me to uncover personal stories and analyze broader topics of access, gender differences, power dynamics, and issues of online instruction through my personal experiences as a mama PhD candidate and TA. In addition, my social media posts portray nuances of identity negotiation in digital spaces as they relate to incidents in my life.

Intergenerational Voices: Negotiating Three Generations of Identities during COVID-19

A major reality check occurred when my grandmother passed away in Ukraine because of COVID-19. I was broken. She raised me and played a fundamental role in shaping my personality. Unfortunately, I could not attend her funeral due to the pandemic and my pregnancy. Up to this day, I feel incredibly guilty because of that. Figure 1 presents the social media post that my father requested. I notified my friends about my grandmother's passing. This will forever be one of the most tragic experiences of my life. I blame the pandemic for this unfortunate event and my inability to travel to say the last goodbye to my grandmother. At the same time, I learned that I was hired as a TA for the next academic year. It came as a bittersweet message, since I was questioning my competency to teach during the pandemic and was anxious about my pregnancy.

The “navigating COVID-19 and pregnancy as a novice TA” vignette touches upon several themes about the pandemic's impact on my TA and mama PhD identity. In particular, the institution's course delivery mode affected my negotiation of a TA identity and greatly influenced my mother and pregnant woman identities. I had to be cautious not to get sick, but I also needed to cater to my students' needs and preferences concerning face-to-face or online delivery modes. Another critical part of this vignette showing the status of TAs in academia was the email correspondence between HR personnel and me when I inquired about possible benefits for TAs in case of illness. At that point, I was not surprised by the response. since TAs are part-time faculty, so

their academic status and benefits are limited or nonexistent. This particular vignette finishes on a brighter note, as my son was born during Thanksgiving break. The screenshot (Figure 3) of that news speaks volumes about how I positioned myself. The loss of my grandmother and pregnancy during the pandemic illuminated broader societal patterns that I made sense of using Bryan Cunningham’s reflexivity framework. The critical incident technique and autoethnographic writing serve as the tools for this reflexivity, as they explore the intersections of gender, motherhood, academia, and digital spaces.

First and foremost, I am a mother of a toddler Emma and baby Mark. I now realize that my choice of this photo being black and white was significant. Since childhood, I remember my grandmother sharing her black-and-white pictures with me. In one of them, she is kissing her son and daughter, who passed away at ages five and three because of the plague, a rapidly spreading disease that had no cure then. My social media post was also a tribute to them and my grandmother. In this moment of comparison, I am reliving the intergenerational moment by connecting my grandma and her children, myself and my children, through the prism of self-reflexivity and beyond time.

The emotional responses documented in the vignettes, such as the guilt over not attending grandmother’s funeral, are not just personal experiences but critical intersections where academic, familial, and gendered identities meet. This connects to Cunningham’s notion that identity negotiation becomes more complex when personal events intersect with professional roles and broader cultural shifts (in my case, the pandemic). Therefore, reflexivity, captured through autoethnographic writing, illuminates the transformative process one undergoes.

(Non)placed Identity in the Academy

Being pregnant during the pandemic made me constantly rethink my position as a productive PhD candidate and a competitive TA candidate. In the vignette about having a COVID baby, the vulnerable side of myself as a pregnant mother is most apparent. It is visible through the word choice in my responses that I was reacting, experiencing an internal negotiation process, and responding emotionally to the cashier’s questions and comments. My verbal responses were a product of the overall external situation—COVID-19—and my internal thoughts. I realized the situation when I decided not to share this incident with anyone. However, it made me rethink my family situation at the time of the global pandemic again and again. I was constantly afraid to disclose to anyone that I was expecting. I was worried that people would joke about the COVID baby repeatedly. I also felt scared for the future of this baby. Not only did I have to go through massive physiological changes and be cautious not to catch the virus, but I also was mentally unprepared to bear the burden of people’s assumptions or judgments about my pregnancy.

I was constantly worried about the chances of this baby surviving the pandemic. I also had some complications in the middle of that pregnancy that made me go back and relive that Walmart experience and ask myself again and again whether having a baby when other people were dying was ethically correct. The last step of reflection and transformation happened when I engaged in the reflexive practice of journaling about this situation. While those thoughts were in my mind, I also acknowledged my students' diverse challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them had concerns as to their family's health, issues with internet access, a feeling of isolation, mental health issues, financial instability, and housing problems, to name a few.

As a new mother in academia, I have reflected on my identity, particularly since reading Park's book on Asian female identity construction (*Narratives*). My journey as a mother is ongoing, and my identity constantly evolves. While being a mother is a privilege, it can also be a source of marginalization. Some colleagues view me as less capable because of my family responsibilities. However, I feel empowered to share my personal experiences and engage with like-minded mothers-scholars through my involvement in the International Association of Maternal Action and Scholarship (IAMAS).

Academic Mothers and COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak revealed numerous challenges and the unpreparedness of the educational system to support student-parents. Consequently, my biggest challenge concerned my status as a mama PhD candidate. Given the shift to online learning, I felt unproductive, distracted, and unable to focus and spend time with my three-year-old daughter and five-month-old son. This also evoked a feeling of guilt. A 2014 study found that student-mothers are chronically tired due to multitasking and balancing schoolwork, family life, and job tasks (Colvert). The individuals involved in the study shared their personal experiences of feeling remorseful and worried about the welfare of their children. Furthermore, the student-mothers faced challenges due to interruptions that hampered their studying progress.

Another major challenge faced by student-parents is substantial time demand. Claire Wladis and colleagues call it a "time poverty" issue (3). According to them, students with children in preschool have a significantly limited amount of time each day for schoolwork, sleeping, eating, and leisure activities. These students only had approximately ten hours daily, much less than the twenty-one hours available to students who do not have children (Wladis et al.). "Silence and concentration are pivotal for my thinking and teaching," writes Alessandra Minello (para. 3), and I could not agree more. But I would also add writing and learning in my case. So, the question remains: How do I function productively and juggle family responsibilities, take care of my daughter and son, be present mentally with my family and friends in

Ukraine, and still complete my work duties and dissertation progress during times of crisis?

I had to accept my inability to function normally. I had to adjust to this new reality and try to make it work. After I read Anne Whitney’s post on the National Council of Teachers of English blog page titled “The Gift of Offering Nothing,” I started to accept my vulnerable state. Whitney uses three writing prompts in this blog post—1) Where are you and how are you? 2) What do you need, and 3) What can you give?—to help the readers interrogate their states. Whitney’s post is an amalgamation of personal and professional writing that could be implemented in teaching practice to showcase the students’ and instructors’ identities and experiences. Even this article is a therapeutic way to reflect on my current state of mind. As for my teacher-scholar identity, the various adjustments I made because of the pandemic have shown me how I would want to be for my students—that is, a humane, understanding, and flexible instructor. Social presence is crucial in online instruction and the same goes for pandemic pedagogy and face-to-face learning in general. Therefore, Vimal Patel’s advice to professors echoes my understanding of how instructors should handle their classes: “Professors need to humanize themselves. Post videos of themselves. Maybe put their cat in the videos. Talk about travel plans or a book they just read. The goal is to be approachable so that students, especially those who feel lost, become connected and comfortable reaching out if they have a problem” (para. 30). For me, instructional interactions with students helped me feel part of the community we created together as a class.

Humanizing the Online Instruction: Social Presence Is a Two-Way Responsibility

Reflecting on my identity as a novice TA during the pandemic, I think if instructors try to humanize their teaching, most problems can be minimized. “Professor Moroz” vignette showcases how I felt a disconnect from the profession but was brought back to it by the actual teaching practice. While many problems existed in the field and in trying times of pandemic instruction, there were also numerous ways to minimize their effect on student learning. For example, in the spring 2020 semester, as I started to take a hybrid pedagogy class, I realized that I expected online courses to be engaging, relevant, and productive for students. But those features might not have been appropriate for pandemic pedagogy for several reasons: access, socio-economic challenges, and family dynamics, to name a few. Webster Newbold discusses online education’s advantages, such as affordability and access. Online learning theory emphasizes flexibility and inclusive education. It acknowledges that students come from diverse backgrounds and is designed to support student learning. Hence, pandemic pedagogy could benefit from implementing

productive strategies into the instructional design of online classes.

In particular, the community of inquiry framework calls for social presence as one of the three major components of successful online instruction. Randy Garrison et al. define social presence as how teachers and students “project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people” (94). This is an essential realization for online instruction, pandemic pedagogy, and regular face-to-face instruction. It also emphasizes the fact that teaching and learning are about human relationships. Online learning does not (or should not) take the teacher out of that equation. When social presence is implemented, the students and instructors feel part of a community; they build relationships and belong to a group.

Regarding pandemic pedagogy, social presence can help eliminate the feeling of isolation. It is easy to feel isolated when you are stuck at home with no one to share your struggles with. For me, the IAMAS community became that circle of like-minded mother-scholars who helped me to feel included and less isolated. Therefore, instructors must build a social presence because it will lead to greater participation, motivation, and comfort within the online space.

According to Mary Stewart et al., first-year writing students reported that social comfort was greatly needed in online learning spaces. However, creating a social presence is the responsibility of students as well. They should be involved in the process and support various ways of engagement. This has been my agenda as an instructor. I emphasize social presence and community building as much as possible in every class I teach. For example, I use video greetings and audio feedback, ask students to comment on each other’s posts frequently, assign group work, create projects that encourage students to connect personally, and start each class with icebreaker activities. The feedback from students demonstrates that my efforts have been helpful. As seen from Figures 3 and 4, students appreciated my approach to instruction and were grateful for being flexible and sympathetic to their struggles during the HyFlex course delivery mode.

Finally, the key issues I experienced during the pandemic, such as access and gender disparity, were not only felt then. These have always been issues in education. As I stated earlier, online learning theory can help academia minimize their effect during these trying times and on a larger scale. An efficient way to help students navigate diverse learning environments would be implementing social presence into the instructional design of all classes, despite their delivery mode. In the next section, I discuss the pedagogical implications.

Pedagogical Implications

In the following section, I discuss pedagogical implications about making the current practices more humanistic to serve students better.

The Critical Incident Technique for Humanistic Instruction

Raising awareness about my identity negotiation during the pandemic and through the critical incident technique made me understand that pedagogical and humanistic value for teaching and learning can come in various forms, from everyday experiences and in multiple spaces—whether in Walmart or on social media. Understanding students’ identities should be used to inform our pedagogical practices. Moreover, the knowledge of digital identities allows us to give online education a more humanistic approach by accepting and legitimizing digital writing. Through implementing the critical incident technique, instructors give students opportunities to pick up on specific themes and emotions, identify certain assumptions, as in the case of my experiences, and reflect on those to achieve understanding. Therefore, a process to utilize the critical incident technique for humanistic instruction includes the immediate reaction of the individual, response, reflection as a way to interrogate the situation, and a realization that ultimately leads to transformation (Figure 6). I followed this process when I experienced the events mentioned above and hope that this process can enable students to reflect on their everyday past or present experiences, which might not have seemed significant at that moment. Still, thinking and writing about the events brings value and connects current and future trajectories.

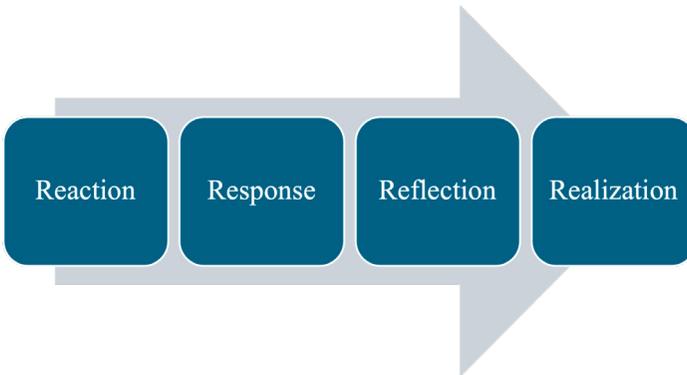


Figure 6: Critical Incident Technique Process

Creative Writing as Empowering

By exemplifying that creative personal writing is authentic, I argue that it should be practised in teacher education and English composition classes. It is a way to engage in a reflexive practice and interrogate one's digital identity. Moreover, autoethnographic writing is a productive methodological approach that enables scholars to legitimize their personal experiences for diverse audiences. Furthermore, autobiographical writing can enhance and prepare writers to write in other genres (Ellis and Bochner; Canagarajah). Finally, inquiring into one's digital identity negotiation through writing poses rhetorical implications worth investigating.

Furthermore, autobiographical writing allows for resolving personal and social dilemmas (Canagarajah). In an online course, autoethnographic writing is vital in community building. With the help of such writing, students can share their personal views and engage in peer review to get to know each other better. As to social presence, autoethnographic writing can help "to create a level of comfort in which people feel at ease around the instructor and the other participants" (Aragon 60). This engagement helps eliminate the feeling of isolation often reported by students who take online or asynchronous classes. Personal communication, feedback from peers and instructors, and nonacademic communication, such as WhatsApp or Snapchat groups, help students build a sense of community and eradicate loneliness.

Digital Identity as Pedagogy

We bring our identities to the classroom as teachers, students, and individuals. These identities shape our pedagogical choices and inform our teaching practices. Brian Morgan explains that the concept of identity in pedagogy allows teachers to treat their identities as valuable pedagogical resources. Suppose we cultivate an identity-as-pedagogy frame in teacher education programs and teach preservice teacher candidates about identity. In that case, we can help them make informed pedagogical choices in their future classes. This resonates with Suhanthie Motha et al., who explore how teachers' identities intersect with their pedagogical practices and focus on how life histories and identities inform teaching. They also highlight how multilingual teachers can draw on our identities or lived experiences as resources to guide our teaching practices. For Motha et al., "Our teaching practices are informed by our life histories and our identities impact our pedagogies" (14). In addition, Park emphasizes the following: "Women's experiences need to be understood not only at the institutional level but also at the personal level. Women's familial experiences are conditioned by the social and familial structure and related to their gendered desire" (*Narratives* 45). Therefore, female identities should be researched and problematized in the academic field. There is still a need to investigate mothering in academia, including workload, time, financial

variables, and power dynamics. Moreover, I would like to expand and further the conversation by including the digital aspect of our identity construction, since the lines between physical and virtual are blurred in the postdigital era. Consequently, by writing this article investigating my digital identity, I urge other teachers and students to reflect on their experiences and use them as a pedagogical tool to inform their teaching and learning.

Concluding Remarks

“People shouldn’t have to choose between pursuing a graduate education and having a family.”

—Rachel Sandalow-Ash

I have opened up about my experiences as a mama PhD candidate and TA during the COVID-19 pandemic. The critical incident technique was used to collect and engage in the reflexive process on three autoethnographic vignettes and social media posts. My experiences, though unique, are part of a larger pool of challenges that those with similar identities faced during the pandemic. I position myself as a reflexive teacher-scholar by engaging in autoethnographic writing, providing details of each incident coupled with a social media post written during the same period. After critically examining my described experiences, I can see how my identities are situated within the larger academic discourses. I agree with Canagarajah, who emphasizes autoethnography’s ability to “articulate one’s own experiences, rather than letting others represent them” (*Transnational* 262). The voices of underrepresented or marginalized populations must be heard even more so during the global pandemic.

Including social media posts as part of autoethnographic data is integral to one’s digital identity portrayal. In addition, social media opens numerous paths for analyses of social interactions and participant reflections. Finally, the pandemic forced instructors to look for alternative pedagogical decisions for engaging students online. As Stewart et al. rightly point out, social presence must be a context-specific endeavour, modified according to a specific discipline and population. For me, autoethnographic writing became a way to engage students in creating and maintaining a social presence in the online learning environment. Autoethnographic writing is therapeutic, and the pandemic showed us that we need that therapy. One of the practical ways to introduce autoethnographic essays into the class is to promote the importance of students’ experiences and validate and endorse those experiences as unique, powerful, and legitimate. Students can write about personal experiences and share them with their peers and instructors for feedback. This process involves all stages of writing, such as drafting, revising, and giving feedback, but it also engages students in metacognitive and critical thinking.

At the time of this writing, I am a mama PhD candidate who constantly negotiates multiple identities in and beyond the academic setting. However, I am first and foremost a mother to two children: four-year-old Emma and fourteen-month-old Mark. I am a transnational, multilingual scholar from Ukraine with a resident-alien status in the United States. I still post on social media from time to time and engage in autoethnographic writing. However, I am not a TA or an instructor. Because of my university's retrenchment process in the spring of 2021, I can no longer be hired as a TA or work elsewhere due to the restrictions of the international student visa. As a mother in academia, I face challenges every day. However, I find comfort in sharing my experiences via social media in groups like Mama PhD or Academic Mothers. I write in my digital journal about moments that happen weekly to react to the moment, respond in my words to the situation, and reflect on the possible outcomes to envision how it can transform my future.

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The Remote Professor: Making Academia Work for Working Mothers

This article explores the intersection of motherhood and academia, highlighting the struggles of working mothers in higher education and offering a model for incorporating remote work into academia. Drawing upon the literature on both academic motherhood and remote work, the author integrates the literature to argue that remote work can offer an innovative path for academic mothers seeking to manage all facets of their responsibilities. Commenting on the greedy institutions of both motherhood and academia, which demand total commitment, the author argues that academia, historically structured to favour men, must evolve to accommodate the realities of modern caregiving, particularly for women. Remote work can provide flexibility, autonomy, and geographic mobility for mothers as they manage the demands of caregiving while meeting the responsibilities of teaching, research, and service inherent to the faculty role.

However, creating effective remote positions must be done with care, as it is incumbent upon university chairs and administrators to address biases in determining who is offered remote roles. They must also work to mitigate challenges with remote work, such as feelings of isolation, lack of connection, and under-appreciation. To counteract these issues, academic chairs can support remote employees by maintaining regular communication, making them feel valued, and fostering a departmental culture that supports in-person and remote members equally. Rethinking work structures in academia through remote faculty positions presents an innovative way to ensure all faculty members, not just some, can thrive.

It was 2017, and my youngest child, my third, was two years old. I had been in my current position as a tenure-track faculty member at a mid-sized public university for five years. I had my second and third children while on the tenure track. My first child, now seven, had been born while I was in a postdoctoral position. By 2017, I had earned tenure; I should have felt relief and renewed energy to have

that milestone behind me, but instead, I was exhausted and utterly burned out. With three kids in five years and a professional life to maintain, sleep and any form of self-care had fallen by the wayside.

During the spring semester of 2017, I finally hit bottom. I developed pneumonia, but being out sick was not an option when in-person classes met two or three times a week. I recall walking the aisles of the lecture hall where I was teaching, watching my students complete an exam. I was sick and so very tired (pneumonia has that effect); I was barely able to put one foot in front of the other. But, at that time, I did not think there was anything to do to fix the rut I had fallen into. The only thing I knew to do was to keep pushing and doing things the way I had always done them. I kept teaching large sections of undergraduates, attended department meetings sometimes fraught with complex alliances and politics, published articles, took students to conferences, and served on the faculty senate. I kept my head above the waterline, but the burnout grew below the surface.

March 2020. The COVID-19 lockdowns began. My kids attended school and daycare on Friday, March 13, and by Monday, the whole city was shutting down. By this time, I had had my fourth child, and he had been attending a local childcare centre for about nine months. Before COVID-19 hit, I worked hard to reengage professionally after being on parental leave and sabbatical for most of the past year. I was trying to pull threads of research back together while navigating a new form of existence—life with four young children at home.

The COVID-19 experience for me and many mothers was one of barely surviving. The pressure to care for the children, be their teacher, and keep them engaged and entertained while maintaining a teaching load, serving as the faculty senate vice-president, and doing this under a constant threat state proved too much for my nervous system. I entered a period of extreme anxiety that paralyzed me. I sought therapy and tried to heal the wound that had opened, but my responsibilities remained the same. I pushed through.

When COVID-19 hit, my three older children were attending a tiny private school, and because of their small numbers, the school reopened and maintained some semblance of a regular school schedule. With three kids in school, I now only had a two-year-old at home with my husband and me as we navigated the new normal of work from home. Together, my husband and I became adept at trading off childcare duties, moving from childcare duties to Zoom meetings seemingly without a hitch. To his credit, my two-year-old also developed sophisticated solo-play skills. We made do as best we could.

With the pandemic waning, I finally had all four of my children on a regular school and childcare schedule, and they were flourishing. Things on campus were in flux, as some people started returning to campus, eager to return to the life they had known, while others of us did not recognize the people we had become. I could not imagine returning to the life I had before the pandemic. Nothing was the same for me, and every bit of me rebelled against fitting myself back into the work structure

I had before the world fell apart. I could not see myself going back to life as usual. I had to find a way to make a change, and I was willing to try anything. By the summer of 2022, with the support of child care and schools for my kids, I had found a way to make remote work for me. I was not about to give that up.

Working remotely, in the way I had crafted my new work and family life, was the only way I could see myself continuing in academia. Moreover, if I worked remotely, I could do that from anywhere. That revelation and the possibilities it awakened changed my family's path forever. The thought of keeping my academic position, now structured remotely in a way in which I could manage my responsibilities, did not enter my mind before the pandemic. Academia demands every bit of you. You go where the job is. Period. But suddenly, this was not the end of the story anymore, at least the way I saw it. On September 9, 2022, I met with my chair and explained what I wanted (needed, really): to continue working remotely and from a neighbouring state. After a decade of trying to make my current location feel like a place I belonged, I realized I could not keep fighting anymore. I needed a change, and they could support me or not. In my case, I was lucky enough to have a chair and a dean who could see the value and possibility of remote employment.

With our oldest headed to middle school soon, there was an added urgency to make the change. With the campus beginning to reestablish itself in a new postpandemic mode and my kids rapidly growing, we needed to leap. Plus, moving to a place with family support nearby for our family of six was incredibly appealing.

Furthermore, remote work truly worked for me. I enjoyed curating virtual learning experiences for my students in my online classes. This work format also allowed me to find space and energy to devote to deeper thought and research in a way I never could in an office setting on campus. It allowed my introverted self to disconnect and distance myself from the stresses of frequent interactions on campus. I also found I could meet my family's needs with much less stress. Kid wakes up sick? No problem. I will be working from home. No more scrambling to cancel classes and meetings at the last minute to accommodate a disruption. Another child needs an early pick-up? No problem. I can fit that in and still return to work. It was a revelation to see how changing the structure and environment of my work could alter everything in my life. I was never going back.

Being a mother and an academic is a double-edged sword for many. In myriad ways, the traditional academic position offers advantages that many women caregivers want: a flexible work schedule, a self-directed professional identity, and autonomy to choose much of one's teaching and research focus. However, academia also has its downsides. Women working in academia are frequently underpaid compared to their male counterparts. They take on the burden of much of the emotional and service labour in the academy, and they must compete in a job that constantly demands more and more, no matter how much they accomplish (Pokorski et al.). Historically, parenthood has also affected women's careers more than men's career trajectories in academia, with far fewer women represented in the upper echelons of the academic hierarchy (Huopalainen and Satama). Given these challenges, academia must start taking steps to change. In particular, academia can change by taking advantage of this current time in history, with all the technological advances we now enjoy, to reimagine an academia that works for everyone. We are in a transformational time in academia, and the jury is still out on whether universities will advance into a new era or remain rooted in the past (McClure).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a natural experiment in academia about the feasibility of completing the work of tenure-track professors remotely. Although remote work in the academy is not new, the scale with which it occurred during the pandemic was. With campuses now in a postpandemic era, the question arises: What lessons can university leaders learn from this large-scale experiment in remote work, and how can we use these lessons to benefit mothers in academia? Of interest is whether remote professorial positions in traditional academic settings can be a path to better support the work and wellbeing of mothers in higher education.

In this article, I explore the challenges that academic mothers face and how remote work outside of a pandemic context can be one avenue to address the strain that female caregivers who are also professors face. I then speak about the role of supervisors and department chairs in supporting remote employees and how their leadership can alleviate many of the challenges accompanying remote work. To conclude, I reflect on how my personal experiences with remote work can help guide institutions into a new era.

Working Motherhood in Academia

The number of people who earn doctorates is now higher among women compared to men, at 54.5 per cent of all doctoral degrees awarded. However, as one looks down the path of promotion, from tenure track hires to associate professors to full professors to administrators, the numbers shift (McKenzie et al. viii). More women in academia hold non-tenure-track positions compared to those in tenure-track roles. Additionally, many women find themselves in a

holding pattern at the associate professor level, with only 36 per cent reaching the status of full professor (Gabriel et al. 188; Teelken et al. 837). Among tenured women, 44 per cent have children versus 70 per cent of tenured men (American Association of University Women).

One explanation for this decline in the representation of mothers is that both academia and motherhood are “greedy institutions” (Ward & Wolf-Wendel 12). As described by Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel in their book on academic motherhood, those in academia, particularly those on the tenure track, are expected to give their unfaltering loyalty to the institution and the profession and to devote their time and energies to the pursuit of one goal—progress along the career path (12). To have other interests in one’s life is viewed by colleagues and administrators as a lack of commitment and not in line with the ideal worker ideology. This situation particularly impacts mothers, as colleagues often perceive the birth of a child as a sign of decreased commitment to their careers. In contrast, men do not face this bias when they have a child while on the tenure track (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 12).

Thus, as women carefully consider and time the birth of a child and how it will fit into their professional goals, they simultaneously try to demonstrate their unfaltering commitment to their chosen profession. However, once motherhood arrives, they now have another set of cultural expectations to live up to—that of the ever-committed mother willing to work tirelessly for her child’s success. Over time, motherhood in the United States (US) has become equated with the image of the ever-sacrificing female figure who is present and attuned to their child’s every whim, always offering up their own needs for the good of their child and doing so without complaint (or help). Catherine Verniers and colleagues describe the cultural ideal of intensive motherhood in this way:

“Intensive mothering” [IM] refers to a cultural model of appropriate mothering structured around three principles: First, children are considered sacred, innocent, and inherently loving and trusting, and as such, should be protected from the “corrupt” outside world. This is achieved through intensive methods, which represents the second pillar of IM. More precisely, appropriate childrearing is emotionally absorbing: children must receive continued and unconditional maternal love, evidenced by permanent loving attention. The method is inherently child-centered; that is, the only proper conduct is to follow the child’s lead. Appropriate childrearing is labor-intensive and time-consuming. Thus, a mother’s day-to-day job is to educate herself as to the latest knowledge regarding her child’s development. However, given the uniqueness of each child, she must also learn to identify the unique needs of her child and to adapt her response to her own child’s needs and desires. Intensive methods are expert-guided,

first because mothers must educate themselves based on expert advice, and second, because they have to consult qualified professionals should particular problems arise. These recommended methods are financially expensive: besides the cost of having recourse to expert-guidance (including, but not limited to, pediatricians, child psychologists, and psychiatrists), the right toys, the richest activities, and the best learning experiences, intensive methods imply lost wages since mothers are expected to cut back their paid work hours to spend more time with their children. Third and finally, according to the IM cultural model of appropriate childrearing, mothers are primarily responsible for fulfilling this mandate. Motherhood is deemed to be an instinctive and deep-seated drive in women. Fathers, as a result of their perceived incompetence, can only provide additional help. (2)

The demands of intensive mothering are just as insidious as those of academia, implying that if mothers do not entirely and utterly commit themselves to their children's needs, they are failures. Thus, cultural expectations can put academic women in an impossible position. They are pulled in two opposite directions: in one direction towards their sacred cultural duty as a mother and in another to their all-demanding careers away from their children. They are often unable to satisfy either set of demands to their satisfaction. Even when they know the problems with both institutions, the cultural pressures can still be detrimental (Pokorski et al.).

As women juggle the mounting demands of academia and motherhood, the negative impacts build up. Mothers experience delayed promotions and lost opportunities for project funding, leading to fewer papers and narrower collaboration networks than male counterparts, if they do not opt out altogether (Khan). Ultimately, the attrition rates in academia are higher for women than men, especially as many women opt to leave tenure-track positions for ones they feel are a better fit for caregiving (Gabriel et al. 196). The choices mothers make at each juncture of their journey as both academic and mother can lead to disadvantages that snowball over time (Derrick et al.)

The traditional activities of academia can be demanding for mothers trying to carry out a professional life and meet the expectations of intensive motherhood. The heavy demands of teaching, maintaining a research pipeline, and attending distant meetings and conferences all place unique challenges on mothers with young children (Pokorski et al.). As noted by Karolina Lendák-Kabók, "The structure of the university itself is simply not friendly to aspiring female academics with families" (1143). The outcome of all of this may well be a hit to the personal wellbeing of mothers, and evidence is mounting that this is indeed the case.

Although mother academics are frequently reluctant to state their own needs in the office due to a fear of increasing bias against them, when asked

directly by researchers, they often state a longing for more time to fit in all their responsibilities, including self-care (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). They also state a desire for time to think, a task critical to the creativity that research requires (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). Mothers in academia frequently feel the brunt of too little time to attend to family; when they do, they are overshadowed by thoughts of not attending to work (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). This conflict between work and family is particularly prevalent among early-career academics, although mid-career faculty are not immune (Hardy et al.). The challenges academia presents for working mothers frequently lead to mothers opting out of tenure-track work altogether. Those who remain are torn between the competing institutions of motherhood and academia. This is commonly unsustainable, leading to burnout and depleted mental wellbeing (Hammoudi Halat et al.). Thus, it is incumbent upon academia to begin to imagine a world where we can be both mothers and academics and not sacrifice our mental health or wellbeing to do so.

The Remote Option

One option academia could consider is offering fully remote, tenure-track professor positions to support female academics with caregiving responsibilities. Before the pandemic, many in higher education considered this option inconceivable. However, given the enormous changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, remote teaching has become a much more feasible solution if only leaders in higher education could see its full potential.

Positions in higher education have long been heralded due to their perceived level of autonomy and flexibility. Many academic mothers point to how their work supports their family life, as they can choose their schedules and research pursuits. However, for many working mothers, autonomy and flexibility may seem like broken promises once they enter the tenure track.

As Phyllis Moen explains with her concept of “career mystique,” there is the prevalent but false perception that those who “clock in” visibly will be rewarded with promotion along their career path. Although a host of structural issues make this belief false, there is pressure, especially on newly hired tenure-track faculty, that they must prove their value by showing up and being visibly invested in their role. When women have children, this pressure can become even more paramount; for now, they must doubly prove their commitment to overcome the biases against them (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). For some mothers, this means choosing to forgo a full maternity leave so that they can teach an in-person class at the beginning of the semester, timing babies to be born in the summer months, or hiding their pregnancies and family life from professional view. Thus, mothers on the tenure track may not experience a flexible schedule, as they are under immense pressure to noticeably be on

campus, completing their work and demonstrating their commitment to their faculty roles. Nevertheless, flexibility remains one of the most important structural changes an employer can make to support working mothers (Capone et al.; Lebron et al.).

Working as a remote faculty member may be one way to realize true flexibility and autonomy in one's work life. Remote work offers the opportunity to more fully embrace one's authentic self, to create uninterrupted time for thinking, and to integrate multiple roles more fluidly (Allen and Birrell; Boccoli et al.; O'Meara and Cooper). Remote work also allows mothers to limit commute times, so school and childcare drop-offs can happen without the additional pressure of arriving at an office at a set time (Rodriguez Castro et al.). Additionally, parents can pick up children when needed rather than when the traditional work clock dictates. Tenure-track faculty may feel undue social pressure to remain in the office until 5:00 p.m. However, with a remote work option, the pressure for face time at the office is removed, and mothers can create a schedule that truly works for them and their families (Casper and Buffardi; Kossek et al.).

Other researchers have noted that working remotely increases the time available for family or personal pursuits (Murmura and Bravi; Pirzadeh and Lingard). Gabriele Boccoli and colleagues found in a survey of over fifteen hundred remote employees in Italy that feelings of job autonomy contributed to a better work-life balance. Results also indicated a positive impact of temporal flexibility on work-life balance. Temporal flexibility and job autonomy positively influenced work engagement and job satisfaction, with no apparent gender differences emerging. Similarly, Samantha Alexandra Metselaar et al. found in a prepandemic sample of Dutch government employees that working from home (but not in other locations) increased perceived work performance through autonomy and work-life balance satisfaction. Research of this type has yet to tackle remote work in academia.

Another advantage remote work may offer mothers is geographic mobility (Toner et al.). Academia is notorious for demanding workers to be fully mobile to achieve success (McLean et al.). With fewer tenure-track jobs available, the adage typically applied to newly minted PhDs is to "go where the job is." Unfortunately, this frequently means uprooting an established home to relocate to an area devoid of connections and family support. As academic mothers find themselves juggling career and family responsibilities, having a support system in place to handle child-rearing demands becomes vital for family functioning, especially given the state of childcare in much of the US (Chaudry and Sandstron). Working remotely from a location of one's choice can allow academic mothers to settle their families in an area that offers essential social and family support, factors crucial for parents' wellbeing (Nomaguchi and Milkie). Remote work options also support dual-academic

families, as universities are notorious for failing to support dual-career couples adequately. Later in life, remote work can also allow grandparents to live closer to their grandchildren (Wood).

Remote work may offer academic mothers a path to crafting a situation that better allows them to integrate multiple roles. Boccoli et al. note that transitions between employee and family roles may be smoother when working from home, reducing stress and burnout and improving psychological wellbeing. Ideally, working from home can allow one to engage more fully in both a work role and a personal family role so that competition between the two roles is reduced.

Although there is evidence that some employees experience remote work negatively as a blurring of boundaries between work and home (Kangas et al.; Yucel and Chung), others may experience this blurring as a positive trade-off for balancing competing demands. As Sean O'Meara and Cary Cooper highlight in their book about remote workplace culture, one of the true benefits of working remotely is achieving work-life integration rather than attempting to distribute demands evenly in some grand scale of work-life balance. Work-life integration, for example, means being able to leave work to pick up kids after school rather than being stuck in traffic with overstimulated and hungry kids late in the day, which puts the whole family in a drained emotional space (O'Meara and Cooper).

Decreasing burnout may be one of the most critical aspects remote work can offer faculty mothers. Jack Thomas McCann and Roger Holt report in their study of 650 online instructors from around the US that they were less stressed and had fewer burnout symptoms than their counterparts who taught in traditional face-to-face formats. Similarly, Paul Franco and Michelle D'Adundo observe that people working from home in the general United Kingdom population reported increased quality of life due to more time with family, less commuting, and a more comfortable work environment.

Organizational Support for Remote Work

In reviewing the literature on remote work in general and academic remote work specifically, one critical element leading to worker satisfaction with remote work is the degree to which their organization supports such work as a viable option (Allen and Birrell; Dhir et al.). In academia, this support tends to come directly from the faculty member's chair and directly and indirectly from the college dean. Postpandemic, there has been a push from administrators in higher education to provide increased flexibility and support for students, mainly as universities compete more and more for fewer students. Providing students with online learning options is viewed as an equity issue that enables diverse learners to access education. The focus is on "designing learning to fit

students' lives rather than requiring students to adapt to university schedules" (Broadbent et al. 16). If universities are willing to support students in this manner, why not support faculty needs similarly? Indeed, faculty who feel supported are also more effective educators and employees (Gabriel et al.; Hammoudi Halat et al.).

Department heads play a pivotal role in determining the success or even availability of remote faculty positions. Due to their direct role in overseeing faculty, researchers estimate that department chairs make 80% of the decisions at a university (Gabriel et al. 196). Thus, examining the chair's attitudes and behaviours around remote work is critical for understanding how such work is implemented within a specific university environment.

One of the most frequently cited drawbacks to remote work for employees in all sectors are feelings of isolation, lack of connection to the workplace, and, for some, feeling underappreciated and undervalued (Toner et al.). To counteract these emotions, department chairs can offer critical levels of social support, which, in turn, can buffer against detrimental outcomes such as the desire to seek alternative employment (Capone et al.). They can offer this support to remote employees by regularly communicating, making employees feel valued, providing equipment and resources, showing interest without micromanaging, listening to remote workers, and showing empathy (Allen and Birrell).

When considering the specific needs of faculty mothers, supervisors play an important role in lowering the experience of work-nonwork conflict. Research by Hilpi Kangas and colleagues suggests that focussed support around family matters, known as family social supportive behaviours, can be more effective than general social support in reducing employee-work-family conflict. Such behaviours include displaying empathy and understanding when employees face family demands while working.

Notably, such family-supportive behaviours by supervisors increase remote workers' control of their boundaries, one of the main determinants of burnout (Kangas et al.). Supportive supervisor behaviours also buffer against negative work experiences. Department heads can reinforce healthy coping skills, allowing faculty to handle work-related challenges better and improving wellbeing (Capone et al.).

Creating a Culture of Remote Work: What Can We Imagine?

Remote work is not a panacea, and such a simple solution is unlikely to remedy the enormous challenges mothers in academia face. Employees vary dramatically in their preference for this form of work (Qureshi et al.), and remote work can exacerbate issues of marginalization and underrepresentation, increasing the exclusion of minoritized populations (Qureshi et al.). Although

many remote workers report a decrease in microaggressions and an increase in psychological safety when they work remotely (Lebron et al.), there is also evidence to suggest that microaggressions carry over to remote situations in equally insidious ways (Lopes et al.). Furthermore, there are also potential issues around which faculty chairs, deans, and other administrators are willing to support in remote roles. Traditional privileges around gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, among others, are unfortunately also likely to limit those who can access remote roles and those who cannot.

It is also possible that being a remote employee and a mother will increase negative biases about the woman's commitment to her professional role, thus stymieing her opportunities for promotion. For example, by not being physically present in department meetings that take place in person, remote workers may lose their voice in departmental decisions. The onus for negating such eventualities lies in department leadership creating a culture valuing all department members, whether in person or not.

Nevertheless, what remote work can do is allow us to rethink traditional notions of time and space in higher education (Qureshi et al.) and, in so doing, reimagine some of the structures that limit the well-being of academic mothers. As noted by Allison Gabriel and colleagues, what would happen if we allowed mothers the creativity and flexibility to imagine a work life that worked for them rather than requiring that they work only within a highly patriarchal system? Critically, the accessibility "provided by remote and part-time employment has been identified as a feminist issue that accommodates female academics to balance work and family caregiving responsibilities" (Toner et al. 683). Thus, by rethinking the structures of academia often seen as unbending, we might create a future wherein everyone can thrive, not just some.

In my experience, remote work has offered a path supporting my academic career and life as a mother of four more thoroughly than anything I ever experienced working on campus. As a remote faculty member in a tenured position, I teach my high-enrollment undergraduate courses online but have been given the flexibility to manage my class sizes by teaching in blocks of seven weeks rather than the traditional sixteen-week semester. I also meet regularly with students in my virtual research lab, exploring and discussing meaningful ideas for research. Remote work has allowed me to pause when necessary to think and explore creative avenues for research ventures. As noted by other academics in remote positions, the ability to think uninterrupted is one of the great benefits of working remotely (Gabriel et al.).

In my sphere, remote work has allowed me to integrate work and family rather than fighting untenable structures that pitted one against the other. I can handle unexpected issues with my children and then flow right back into handling a teaching-related email or pop into a Zoom meeting. There is no longer the same stress

and friction between my roles as a mother and faculty member as there once was. To me, this has been the greatest revelation of all. As Amy Allen and Lori Birrell write, “Looking ahead, employees and managers alike should leverage these experiences (of the Pandemic)—the good, the bad, and in-between, to establish new norms that prioritize the needs of individuals and recognize that work will not and should not look the same as it did in February 2020” (413). I hope my remote work experiences can allow others in similar situations to rethink their work structures in a way that works for them and that university leaders will support the self-determination of their employees.

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**Term Time:
A Revolutionary Lexicon for Mother-Demics
A Performance Text**

*Term/Time/A Revolutionary Lexicon for Mother-Demics was first performed as part of the ResearchWorks Series at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, England, on Monday, February 24, 2025. In this written publication following the performance, we begin with a note on the fonts readers will encounter herein. Taking a cue from the typographical polyvocality of mothering in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (1998), the performers, Dr. Laura Bissell and Dr. Lucy Tyler, express themselves in three typefaces. Lucy's typeface (and her speech acts in performance) is a font often used in children's literature: **Gill Sans**. Laura's typeface is **Grotesque**, acknowledging the historical connotations of this term with birthing bodies. A third typeface, **Segoe UI**, is used to demonstrate the mother-demics' collective speech. Segoe UI is the typeface of the web and desktop app Microsoft Teams, the forum for the mother-demics' communications. Herein, we appropriate Segoe UI as a speculative organizing typography of mother-demics. We begin the performance now.*

The performance begins: two female academics stand on a stage. One of the female academics brings up the following quotation on a screen: "The return to paid work is having to live within these two temporal registers simultaneously without letting one negatively impact the other. In an 'ideal' situation, one should not even know about the other, colleagues should never be made aware of parental temporality, of pumping in toilets, of hourly night feeds" Wolfarth 121.

Lucy: In this creative-critical text, two academic mothers working in contemporary performance attempt to find a lexicon (a vocabulary and a dictionary) for the synchronous work of motherhood and academia. As a revolutionary gesture and resistant act, we (Lucy and Laura) have devised a project called Term-Time, a weekly online meeting for us to become a tiny community of mother-demics.

Laura: My name is Laura, and I am an Athenaeum Research Fellow and lecturer in contemporary performance at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. I am a performance-researcher and writer, and I have been an educator in contemporary performance and live art for the past fifteen years. I am interested in writing in all its forms and have had my poetry, creative writing, life writing, and academic work published in journals and anthologies. I have recently completed a monograph on matrescence and performance (Intellect) and am co-editor of the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media's* special edition on matrescence and media with Jodie Hawkes and Elena Marchevska.

Lucy: My name is Lucy, and I am an associate professor of performance practices at the University of Reading. I am a performance maker, writer, and educator in performance and have been teaching in higher education for fifteen years. My scholarship mostly explores how to hold space for artists to make new works. I organize the Arts Council England-funded Work in Progress project in conjunction with South Street Arts Centre in Reading, United Kingdom (UK), to seed fund and develop new touring works by early and mid-stage artists of national and international acclaim. I am the author of numerous articles and chapters on performance development and the *English Play Development under Neoliberalism* (CUP, 2025). Because of a background in radical left-wing, antiglobalization politics, I attend to performance through a Marxist lens.

Laura: We were connected by Emily Underwood-Lee, whose collaborative work with Lena Šimić has inspired our enquiries into maternal performance and our collaborative duet and shared creative practice throughout Term Time. When I looked back at our email exchanges, our initial meeting to discuss a potential project had been deferred due to one of our children being unwell. This was the first of many interruptions to our process, including illnesses and shifting academic schedules, which is why we built an understanding and expectation of these interruptions and adaptability towards them into our agreement for working together which we made at the outset. Lisa Baraitser says:

In some senses it is barely possible to conceive of maternal subjectivity outside of the experience of interruption itself. The lived experience of mothering is closer to a seemingly endless series of “micro-blows”; what I am referring to as breaches, tears or puncturing to the mother’s durational experiences bringing her back ‘again and again’ into the realm of the immediate, the present, the here-and-now of the child or infant’s demand. (68)

I cannot help but hear in the here-and-now of mothering that Baraitser refers to, the here-and-now-ness that Dee Heddon also writes about in her 2008 study on autobiographical performance. The here-and-now-ness of mothering and performance (and we argue, teaching performance)—as well as the here-and-now-ness of the time we have carved to be together for this project—is a key concern of this work. Time, and how to be present within it, permeates this project.

In this performance lecture, you will hear us experimenting and trying to find this lexicon. In doing so, we realize it doesn’t fit properly anywhere; this form of writing and knowledge feels precarious. We wonder if this partly is because our here-and-now as academic mothers in performance is uncertain. We question if we are experiencing the end times for our discipline: There is a crisis in arts funding; many performing arts courses across the UK are closing, and the sector is in crisis. Performance making and live art involve taking creative risks, and these risks feel increasingly exposing, impossible, and incomprehensible in the current climate. But this is our attempt.

Lucy: Drawing on collaborations of mother-demics in maternal performance (e.g., Šimić and Underwood-Lee) and critical theory exploring maternal time (e.g., Baraitser; Putnam), we wanted to write our way into and through academic motherwork.

Laura: A “term” can be a way of describing or communicating something, a linguistic expression of an idea defining categories and genres. It can also refer to time—capturing how long something lasts and its temporal limits and parameters. Terms can be structures: In the UK, academic semesters are “terms.” We disrupted our term time with creative interventions, carving time to explore our lived experiences as mother-demics.

Lucy: Our lexicon advances the existing literature exploring the material conditions of mothers in academia, which has mostly taken the form of an institutional or sector critique. Scholars have previously highlighted the particularities of the academic’s career timeline concerning when to become a mother (e.g., Vise; Mirick and Wladkowski). Moreover, Kellie Gonçalves’s article title, “What Are You Doing Here, I Thought You Had a Kid Now”: The

Stigmatisation of Working Mothers in Academia,” is illustrative of this reality. Amy Skinner empirically analyses the self-expression of mothers in academia, highlighting the felt sense of two contradictory roles—that of the academic and the mother—and the language through which they express themselves. While scholarship has identified the double life of the mother academic, it does not, as our work does, attempt to move beyond this institutional critique towards a significant development in understanding the maternal academic. Here, we forge neologisms and creative practices that further the methodologies available in exploring mother academics and the available lexicon for describing our double work. We are not alone in seeking a lexicon to support people inhabiting spaces in which they have not always been welcome. Indeed, we draw on contemporaneous lexicons during this historical moment, such as Jane Oremosu and Maggie Semple’s *My Little Black Book: A Blacktionary*. By forming our tiny community of vocabulary seekers, we signal a critical turn in collaborative practices in scholarship (e.g., coauthorship) to advance a new perspective of how academic mothers can exist collectively within the higher education matrix.

Laura: In “‘Poor Piper’: Academic Performances and Maternal Interruptions Made Public,” Angela Sweigart-Gallagher reflects on two moments where her work life as an academic was maternally interrupted suddenly, unexpectedly, and publicly during what she describes as “routine academic performances” (103). She says: “The constant interruption that marks my maternal subjectivity is usually just the back-stage drama of a professorial life that I’ve carefully staged to demonstrate competence and professionalism” (103). Sweigart-Gallagher also reflects on how this façade crumbled when she had to pick her daughter up from nursery due to a rash and teach her class with her child in the space, making visible her mothering to her students. This breakdown between the carefully constructed “professor mode” and what she calls the “messy complexities” of “mommy mode” (103) provoked by her daughter Piper’s interruption causes her to realize how exhausting and dishonest the schism between these two modes of being can be. The other moment she shares is when she is presenting her portfolio of work and student evaluations to colleagues for her second-year review, proof that she is tenure-worthy and feels a sense of pride in her work. Sweigart-Gallagher describes “a well-meaning male colleague, intending his comments as the highest praise” who announces, “In looking at everything you did this last year, all I could think was Poor Piper, she must really have missed her mommy” (103). Another colleague immediately tells her that Piper is fine. This second interruption is not by her child but by a colleague who uses this moment to note that in excelling in her academic role and work, she must be failing as a mother. Her mothering is up for scrutiny, along with her academic track record. Sweigart-Gallagher says:

It was a public versus private interruption, and yet, here the “micro-blow” was doubly jarring. It is one thing for your child to literally or metaphorically tug at the tail of your sensible black jacket, but it is another for a colleague to inadvertently sucker punch you with a compliment during your annual review, thrusting you instantly into mommy mode even in the absence of your child. (104)

Lucy: Since our performance now (in these live and digital spaces) is going to be reperformed as a journal article in the written form (and encountered textually), this practice as research constitutes a unique and distinctive method in exploring motherhood and academia’s relationship through an investigation in liveness, text, and the process of coauthorship. Together, we ask: What are the temporal and embodied connections between academic work (in the field of performance) and motherwork (Ruddick)? We question maternal-demia and consider how academic work and motherwork can be synchronous. In creating a coauthored lexicon, we seek to find a way of performing what we discovered through writing, language and speculative thinking.

Term Time: A Project

Laura: Laura and Lucy embark on:

a weekly deep-dive into aca-motherhood, maternal-demia

(the internalized institution of academia or is it the internalized institution of motherhood?)

A work-a-day distancing from the domestic to consider the domestic

Our words (spoken and written) shapeshift from poetry

Lucy: to prose

Laura: to research questions

Lucy: to anecdotes

Laura: to similarities

Lucy: we comment on, we map.

Are we reclaiming motherhood by inserting it inside the working day, or are we reclaiming academia by researching motherhood?

How did we get so entangled and so creative in our weaving?

Our tiny community (in 1.5 hours TeamsTime a week) tries to exteriorize what it feels

like to be mother-demics. The feeling of working on scholarship, on performances

of matrescence (Jones). And the feeling of being both.

We have different voices, but sometimes we arrive at the same.

Laura: There are:

Two of us

Lucy: Two children

Laura: Two kinds of work (mothering and academic)

Lucy: Two institutions

Laura: Two countries

Lucy: Two people becoming willfully precarious by becoming mothers

Laura: Two sets of privileges

Lucy: Two faces (on screens)

Laura: Two audiences

Lucy: Watching two bodies

Laura: But this is the first time they have been in the same space together.

Term Time: Our Research Questions

Lucy: What are the temporal and embodied connections between academic work (in the field of performance) and motherwork?

Laura: We question maternal-dementia and consider how academic work and motherwork can be synchronous.

Lucy: What are the synergies in the temporal registers of these things? How can we explore these by purposefully stitching them together, mapping them, and layering them over each other again and again? How can they exist as a palimpsest? (This is how they are lived).

Laura: Prompt: What would a lexicon of academic/mother work look like? Can we write it?

A is for assessments, angst

Lucy: A is for A disclosure

I'm a Marxist. By that I mean, I suppose, that I want a revolution.

I have studied Marx's works, carried them in my handbag, read them on buses and trains, and in reading groups in pubs and the labour ward.

My role in a revolution is a quiet one, I suppose. My only revolutionary act is this: I read *Das Kapital* (again and again) and apply it to my theatre scholarship.

I do not do this uncritically.

I understand that Marx was a nineteenth-century European cis male (often disorderly, excited, drunk, and lascivious). Moreover, I know that Marx's ideas on the operation of capital (often disorderly and excited themselves) omitted women and the global majority.

For this reason, I have studied the writing of female scholars who have worked to integrate emancipatory perspectives into Marx. In addition, I have read the works of Black scholars who radically reappraise *Kapital* to develop the radical tradition of Black Marxism. Reading this work has sometimes made me prone to make random Marxist critiques, which are sometimes unwelcome at drink parties and the workplace.

In Chapter 10 of *Das Kapital* Volume One, Marx has a chapter titled "The Working Day." This chapter details how factory labour in England was unregulated before it was regulated. People died to enact the eight-hour working day (eight hours for sleep, eight for work, and eight for leisure). There is a history of workers' holidays. The radical precedent of the working day, we know, is not adhered to in the academic workplace.

My time is not my own, ever. There is a double time in which I am undertaking the two labours simultaneously. My diary (all blue) contains personal appointments interlocked with professional ones, like sweet peas climbing and intertwining around each other. Sometimes, there are breaks in my labour, where I take what I refer to in my out-of-office email as "academic leave." This means that, in theory, I do not check my email. These vacations are not necessarily self-selected but robustly organized by the academic calendar...

Laura: B Is for Breasts (in Academia)

In art: Idealized, revered, accepted, voyeured

In literature: Fetishized, fantasized, freaked, fucked

In mothering: Shared, mutated, milked, sucked

In sex: Sucked, squeezed, seen, unsequestered

In feeding: Sequestered, seen, sucked, tutted at

In performance: Attempts to reclaim but sexualized

In porn: sexualized, bouncing, rubbing, reading

In fashion: Barely there

In memory: Soft skin touch soft home

In illness: Malignancy hidden, rebuilt, recovered

In transit: Bra, sports bra, Lycra top, t-shirt

In development: Buds, budding, embarrassment, hide

In comfort: To solace, help, strengthen

In discomfort: Unsolace, uncomfortable, underwear, underwire, underwhelm

In academia...

Lucy:

1. I used to tell a story about this one time, during my drama MA, I was introducing a world-renowned playwright's keynote at a conference. At that time, I wore a lot of men's clothing, including large men's shirts (I thought I was very cool). When I was introducing the keynote, I did not realize that the shirt had opened down to reveal my braless chest to my waist. When I came off the stage, another student hypothesized that baring my breasts was done for some professional gain. I was humiliated but also interested in the thought that my breasts could somehow support a career trajectory in the theatre just by being out. I had always assumed it was the other way around.
2. A memorable time nipples have become a discussion point in performance practice teaching is about Pina Bausch. Watching archive performances of Café Müller, students often comment during the screening about the erect nipples of performers, including Pina's. What makes nipples so funny to the students? How, in the chiffon or silk slips, do they read to us in the

performance classroom? The nipples (and the breasts) feel significant, since sexuality, gender performance, and power dynamics are often at play in Bausch's work. Are nipples part of Tanztheater? We went to see *Nelken* at Sadler's Wells, a leading Dance organization in London (2024). Being in the upper circle, we could see the chiffon, but we could barely see the breasts. They didn't seem to matter anymore.

3. I tell my first-year female student group about Jade Montserrat's *Feeding Chair*, which was touring UK modern art galleries in the summer of 2024. I recommend they go and see this work, which invites parents and carers to feed their young children in galleries and other public spaces. I tell them that in Oxford in the 1980s, the Museum of Modern Art was the only place that permitted public breastfeeding. They are bemused; they ask me to verify if breastfeeding burns a lot of calories. I tell them about all the cake I ate on maternity leave, the pathological baking and icing. I do not tell them what it was really like: the hours on the sofa, the crying, the visiting the breast screening centre, the mastitis, and the tutting in Marks and Spencer's cafe. I do not say any of that.

B Is for Breast Desk Drawer

A space to keep ephemera relating to breastfeeding (e.g., a second top in case of leaks, breast pump, and nipple balm).

Laura: B Is for Busy (All the Time)

C Is for Carriance (Ettinger)

D Is for Daughter

Lucy: Drafts

Laura: D Is for Desk Photo

I am looking at it now

of Saltcoats beach

in Ayrshire, on the windy West Coast

the sky is blue

a haze of yellow light to the left of the picture

a smattering of cloud

shingle in the foreground, pebbles, some shells

waves further out

LAURA BISSELL AND LUCY TYLER

and on the horizon a wall of trees
with whitewashed buildings to the right
one foot in the sand, the other leg raised
arms out to the side, fingers splayed
legs flesh-bared,
hair wind-swept
face of glee
a pink t-shirt claims
“Girls Can Change the World”:
not visible is the ice cream we got
that melted so fast that we had to use my dress as a towel
what remains unseen
is the cuddle you gave me when I put you in the car
sand in toes and clothes and hair and in between sticky fingers
I look at this picture and remember other moments
being a child on the beach
my sister looking at the white sand
shouting *snow!*

E Is for Evenings, Essays

Lucy: E Is for Emergency Contact

I have called the preschool to check on my child more times than they have called me at work.

E Is for Exams

Do I progress since my exit velocity was achieved in the speed I reached running sweatily between sports day and the exams board I chaired?

Laura: F Is for Fuck This

Lucy: F Is for Finger-Painting Capital

The presence of children’s artwork as a means to signify your home life

F Is for Flexible Working Contract

A human-resources-devised performance in which your role involves requesting bends in time, agreeing to pretend to work less than you do, relegating certain activities to the unspoken, and accepting the extent of your labour.

Laura: G Is for Going to Work/Going Home

Lucy: H is for Human Resources

Laura: H Is for Haiku

Myths of motherhood

Mess, just scrambling and juggling

Keep losing the thread

Lucy: Lucy and Laura

Teach, read, make art, learn, mother.

How do we do it?

Laura: I Is for Invisible

I Is for Imagining

Imagining is inherently a hopeful act. To look ahead is to see the future, to invite and summon it. Imagining as incantation and invitation.

I went to a talk on menstruation in academia called “Blood Work.” The term was described as a combination of “body work”—work people are expected to do with their bodies or work done to other’s bodies (e.g., personal care)—and “dirty work”—work with an “occupational taint” and moral, physical and emotional connotations (e.g., working with the blood of others). Professor Kate Sang claims that “The labour of managing your own menstruation = bloody work”. it made me think of our project and what the “work” is and how it is in the body. As Grosz says: “Far from being an inert, passive, non-cultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles” (19).

Sang argues: “The ideal academic does not have a body, does not have a menstruating body.” She recounts the experience of an academic who had a miscarriage in her office at university and how she waited until everyone had gone home before she felt she could leave.

Sang says: “The menstruating and pregnant body is not compatible with a research career.”

In the future of our mother and academic work, the body should be acknowledged. It should be visible, and it should be allowed to speak. In our tiny revolution of two, we have tried to scope out the lived realities of our mother and academic work, its relationality, form, patterns and structures, and how it takes up space and time.

Perhaps the role of the mother-demic can be to trouble and draw attention to the structures of term times, what they are loaded with, and how they (actually) pan out. In doing this, we ask how to care for students and children and teach students and children synchronously. We teach performance but realize we have rarely mentioned mother-artists in our teaching. If we do not explicitly address the reality of artmaking and mothering and do not speak about our entanglements of making and mothering in an academic context, how can we expect others to acknowledge this?

Lucy: J Is for Juggle

Laura: K Is for Kisses

In the morning and at bedtime

Lucy: L is for Love

bell hooks says in *All About Love: New Visions*, “The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control” (13).

Laura: L Is for Lunches

Lucy: Literature reviews

Laura: Laundry

L Is for Laptop

You made your laptop from cardboard and cut-out paper. A code on the paper screen was the password. The keyboard went from A to Z, and the space bar was a rectangle drawn in white paint pen.

Lucy: M Is for Mess

Laura: Marking

Lucy: Marks on the Wall

Laura: M Is for Movement

Lucy: What are the choreographies of academic work?

Laura: Typing, teaching, reading, sitting, nodding, and writing

Lucy: What are the choreographies of motherwork?

Laura: Bending, carrying, lifting, fixing, opening, and helping

Lucy: Are there any gestural commonalities?

Laura: Walking, nodding, looking, showing interest, and being open

Lucy: Are there any patterns?

Laura: Academic work is more static and motherwork more active. Both are exerting, tiring, exhausting, and depleting. Both are rewarding.

Lucy: Where do you feel the work in your body?

Laura: My neck, shoulders, hips. At the point where my neck meets my head. Behind my eyes.

Lucy: I am mostly, I think, in a squat position—by

the side of the bathtub, on the twister mat,

Tying a shoelace, picking up a toy. I bend, I

Kneel, I lie down next to you at night. I am

Rarely seated except when we watch a show

And go long together. One time, last

Summer I think I had COVID-19 and lost an hour

Or two on the floor while you played around

Me. We rarely walk, we race! Here, at work,

I think I hunch, or I am mostly standing or seated

—certainly static. Often twisting,

Slightly to point at a screen, some writing,

Holding a file. There are some things I

Wouldn't do with my body here—stand on a

Table, squat in a lecture, sit against a wall

Drinking tea while someone draws around

My head.

Laura: N Is for Never Enough Time

O Is for Office Still Life

You would love the stationary

I think

Might swing on the swivel chair

And open the drawers

You would like the shelves of books

(Not to be climbed)

You might rifle through my paperwork

Peep in folders

Hide under my desk

Perhaps if a colleague came in

You might disappear behind my legs

Like when you were little

Would you recognize the cushions I made?

One in your room

One here on a grey plastic chair

Trying to make it more comfortable

You might wonder where the stage is

Red velvet curtains

Black boxes

You might be disappointed

By the lack of magic

The absence of theatre

Lucy: P Is for Publications, Performance, People, Pinky Promises, and Plimsoles

Laura: Q Is for Questions

Lucy: R Is for Reading

Laura: Resting

Lucy: Research

Laura: R Is for Research Plans

A walking performance with my daughter—we choose alternate walks (e.g., I choose Ben Lomond, and she chooses a walk to the ice cream shop). We record our conversations and make maps.

A performance where my daughter and I sook a long bit of spaghetti across a stage.

A performance where my daughter and I ask each other questions with no limits or censors.

A performance with my daughter where we are both dressed as cats.

A performance where mothers perform a choral work of comforting, shooshing, and low singing.

A performance where I ask my mother questions about being a mother in front of an audience with my daughter onstage.

A durational performance where mothers take naps, and children pretend to read to them.

Lucy: R Is for Revolution

Is revolution possible in mother and academic work, and what would it look like and feel like? It looks like two people who have had babies and talk to each other online. Their quiet conversation focusses on holding space—just a quiet space online—to describe the historical material conditions they experienced when they returned to academia following parental leave. This revolution looks like two people who meet regularly to recognize their experiences are similar. It looks like people identifying what it is to work for each other. The discovered similarities are not necessarily so objectionable that they need to change right away. The discovered similarities are more about how time is structured now that there is a double labour of academics and mothers. Is this class consciousness? What is class consciousness in academia? What is class consciousness in academia for mothers? It is the discovery that it is not us alone who doubles diaries, who...

Laura: S Is for Sleep

Lucy: Snack and Chat

Laura: S Is for Screen Children

Children as desktop/phone wallpaper.

Lucy: S is for Speculative futures

I cannot get to this speculative future of mother and academic work
without reference to a complicated grief
of past academic work (because maybe they are the same thing).
There is a version of academia where we used to be together
Where some of us (and that is the problem because it was only some of us)
sat together and read or walked and talked and handed each other books
and notes, and essays and banners,
and we met ourselves in so doing,
and we met each other in so doing.
And although there wasn't your child on the grass in the park,
or mine in the beer garden,
or both playing outside the library as we spoke to each other,
there could have been.
There could have been a baby in your arms or mine,
a block builder under this table,
a sand sculpturer building a tower
while we talked about your writing, or mine.
There could have been a child moving between our offices,
you showing my child the curves of an "s" on your page,
me showing your child the way two words can come together,
like magic, like motherdemic.

Laura: T Is for Tired, Theatre

Lucy: T Is for TERM

Laura: T Is for TIME

Lucy: T Is for Teaching Pedagogies, the Performance Discipline, and Maternal Dramaturgies/Performances of Matrescence

1. The imbrication of the maternal confessional into performance discourse in the classroom—the interpretive labour of risks and value for students (sometimes in terms of other performance methodologies).
2. The unspoken constraints around different identities to higher education forms and how they impact on and interact with one another (e.g. the higher education manager and the loss of counter-cultural positionality in the department).

3. Our role models were not mothers.
4. Taboo and risk in teaching performance (including material risk to jobs) and the integration of performances of matrescence concerning those logics.
5. The relationship between teaching and practising autobiography and the student studio, especially the grotesque, abject, and uncanny(?) aspects.
6. Tension and tipping points between repression, punishment concerning higher education and partial access (usually) for babies in the arts.
7. Funding differences around provision for childcare in Scotland and England.

Laura: U Is for Undergraduate

Lucy: V Is for Volcano

Laura: W Is for Willpower, Washing, Walking, Waking, and Work

Lucy: W Is for Wastepaper

I have two bags of waste
paper; should be shredded
in my unlocked cupboard
I hope you do not unpack:
students' progression notes,
council tax bills, production flyers
from performances—a baby in utero
Is it kissing a shotgun
goodnight? Don't look at that!
You have stuck a unicorn to the board
I use for dramaturgical decisions.

Laura: W Is for Work

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workworkworkworkwork

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work **mothering** work **mothering** work **mothering**
work **mothering** work

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W **mother** O **ing** R **motherin** K **g**

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Lucy: Šimić and Underwood-Lee reflect on their status as mothering academics concerning their mothers. About bringing her children into her praxis, Šimić reflects that her mother is proud of her for becoming an academic “and working in a university and being a reader,” but she is not very proud of her for “being a feminist performance artist,” and her mother was annoyed that Šimić took her “children to demonstrations” (22). Speaking back to her mother, Šimić responds: “These things I do are actually helping me in my career, you know. This is how I became a reader, how I make my living: by being an activist, by being a feminist. So I still have to fight for my position as a feminist activist, performance artist, art activist” (22). At the end of this revolutionary lexicon for mother-demics, we acknowledge that we, too, still must fight.

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HEIDI M. MACGLAUGHLIN, KIMBERLY K. PUDANS-SMITH,
ASHLEY N. GREENE, AND BEVERLY J. BUCHANAN

Balancing Multiple Roles: The Experiences of Deaf Female Doctoral Students

This article presents an autoethnographic study featuring the narratives of four Deaf mothers who embarked on the challenging journey of pursuing doctoral degrees while fulfilling their responsibilities as parents, maintaining full-time employment, managing household duties, and carrying additional burdens associated with higher education. What initially began as conversations among these four mothers, sharing their personal experiences and struggles throughout their doctoral studies, evolved into the undertaking of this autoethnography. This study's objective was to examine whether the absence of a support system, motivation, and family attitudes towards higher education had any discernible impact on their determination to attain a doctoral degree. Through a comprehensive analysis encompassing both formative and summative approaches, four common themes emerged: support, motivation, family attitude, and balancing roles. These themes align with existing ethnographic literature in this domain. Furthermore, the authors provide valuable insights and tools derived from these themes, facilitating the successful completion of a doctoral degree while fulfilling the multifaceted roles of being a mother.

Receiving a doctoral degree is a monumental achievement, often requiring immense dedication, perseverance, and sacrifice. For Deaf female doctoral students who are also mothers, this journey entails balancing the multifaceted roles of parenthood, professional responsibilities, and academic pursuits. This autoethnographic study explores the narratives of four Deaf mothers who navigated these challenges while earning their doctoral degrees. Through their experiences, the study sheds light on the interplay between support systems, motivation, and family attitudes towards higher education, highlighting the unique barriers and triumphs encountered by this group. The article's primary objective is to provide insights into the strategies these women

employed to achieve success and to contribute to the growing discourse on intersectionality within academia.

The four authors—Heidi MacGlaughlin, Kimberly Pudans-Smith, Ashley Greene, and Beverly Buchanan—serve as the focal points of this study. Their distinct backgrounds and shared determination offer a compelling framework for examining the intersection of gender, disability, and parental status in academia. Introducing these individuals early allows readers to understand better the context and significance of their experiences, setting the stage for the thematic analysis that follows.

Heidi MacGlaughlin, the primary author, is the first in her family to earn a graduate degree. She was adopted into a hearing family and introduced to sign language at eight. As a Deaf woman, she navigated both Deaf and hearing institutions, earning her doctorate within a decade while becoming a mother. She completed her degree when her son was eight. Her experiences as an educator, doctoral student, and mother inform her understanding and support for Deaf women balancing advanced studies with multiple responsibilities.

Kimberly “Kim” Pudans-Smith, a first-generation college graduate from a third-generation Deaf family, defied societal norms in the Midwest. A mother of two and grandmother of three, she earned her EdD when her youngest child was nine. Her child documented her journey, including her sacrifices and determination. Pudans-Smith’s experiences as a Deaf mother in higher education shaped her understanding of the challenges facing women.

Ashley Greene, a first-generation college graduate and assistant professor, is the only Deaf member of her family. As a divorced mother of two children of deaf adults (CODAs), she completed all three of her degrees while raising her children. Her experiences provide valuable insights to support students facing similar challenges.

Dr. Beverly Buchanan, a Canadian-born Deaf academic, earned degrees in biology, Deaf education, and sign language education while balancing single motherhood. Her dissertation in 2021 focusses on preserving Maritime Sign Language. She is an advocate for Deaf education and sign language and leads American Sign Language (ASL) programs in Canada.

Literature Review

Academic Identity and Motherhood

Female doctoral students often face significant obstacles when cultivating their academic identity. Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. note that the process of establishing a scholarly persona frequently leads to tension, particularly when compounded by societal expectations (59). Michelle Maher et al. also highlight that gendered caregiving responsibilities often deter women from persisting in doctoral programs (400). These challenges are

reflected in the “motherhood penalty” in the United States, where societal perceptions and treatment of mothers adversely affect their academic pursuits (McCutcheon and Morrison 92). Our participants’ narratives also reveal how their roles as caregivers and academics often clashed, influencing their academic trajectories.

Forming an academic identity is a multifaceted process that involves cultivating a scholarly persona, defining research interests, and shaping professional aspirations. However, for female doctoral students, this process becomes more complex due to factors like societal expectations, gender biases, and the intersectionality of roles and responsibilities. These factors can create conflicts between personal lives and academic ambitions.

In academia, there is a prevailing bias against motherhood. Mothers often face systemic disadvantages, including reduced career opportunities, lower pay, and limited support, contributing to the perception that motherhood and academic pursuits are incompatible. Research by Jessica M. McCutcheon and Melanie A. Morrison has highlighted that women who become mothers in academic settings dedicate significantly more time to childcare than their male counterparts, despite having fewer children (93). This disparity increases work-family conflict, as these women struggle to balance parental responsibilities with academic goals. Moreover, women in academia often experience gender biases and inequities that contribute to lower research output compared to men (McCutcheon and Morrison 97). These disparities stem from implicit biases, institutional barriers, and limited access to resources, necessitating a reevaluation of societal attitudes and the creation of supportive environments for female doctoral students.

In 2020, women earned the majority of doctoral degrees, outnumbering men in graduate school by a ratio of 148 to 100 (Perry). However, gender imbalances persist, particularly in STEM fields, where women remain underrepresented (Perry). National Science Foundation data also reveal that 9.1 per cent of all doctoral graduates in 2019 reported having a disability. PhD mothers are more affected by parenthood and marriage than married men with children or single women without children. These mothers are often distributed across non-research institutions rather than research universities (Kulp 82). Additionally, deaf individuals earning doctorate degrees are underrepresented, with only 1.2 per cent of PhDs issued to deaf individuals (National Science Foundation). This underrepresentation contributes to the isolation many deaf students experience within academia (Cooke and Caicedo 1).

Intersectional identities play a crucial role in understanding the experiences of individuals who navigate multiple social identities. While research on women in doctoral studies exists, it often focusses on normative experiences. This article seeks to illuminate the experiences of doctoral students who identify as women, mothers, and individuals with disabilities.

For mothers, their primary sense of identity often revolves around their role as caregivers. The women in the Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. study emphasize that motherhood forms the core of their self-identity (62). They express a strong commitment to this role, stating they would not compromise any other aspect of their lives above their identity as mothers. Women, particularly in academic settings, are more likely to assume greater responsibility for their homes and children than their male counterparts (Maher et al. 400). Notably, the average age of women enrolling in doctoral programs has increased significantly since 1970, with many women now over the age of thirty-five. This shift reflects the growing intersection of academic pursuits with personal and family responsibilities.

Disabilities and Intersectionality

However, society often reduces individuals with disabilities to their disability, thereby overshadowing their multifaceted identities. Students with disabilities, in general, face challenges in higher education, even in the presence of successful litigation and court cases advocating for their rights (Los Santos et al. 16). The transition from high school to college poses particular difficulties for students with disabilities, as they often feel overlooked by institutions, resulting in gaps in their academic experiences. Accessing necessary support services requires these students to navigate through assessment offices and provide documentation of their disability—a process that can be time-consuming and hinder timely access to appropriate resources.

For instance, Deaf doctoral students enrolling in universities often require sign language interpreters to facilitate their participation in hearing classrooms. However, finding interpreters familiar with the higher education context can be a daunting task. It can feel like searching for a needle in a haystack to locate a qualified sign interpreter. In Australia, Deaf university students have shared their challenges in higher education, highlighting the difficulties in finding qualified interpreters that provide them with full access to educational settings (Napier and Barker 236). Although higher education institutions are generally well-prepared to accommodate disabled students, they may lack the necessary familiarity with the specific needs of disabled faculty members. This ill-preparedness can hinder the employment and tenure experiences of individuals with disabilities, including Deaf academics (Smith and Andrews 1528). These challenges and barriers can have a demotivating effect on doctoral students, particularly if they do not have a faculty job lined up after completion. Many higher education institutions are unfamiliar with the specific needs of Deaf academics, leading to obstacles in their employment and tenure processes.

Motivation

Motivation is a crucial driver pushing individuals towards their goals and sustains goal-oriented behaviours. For women pursuing doctoral degrees, however, the journey often takes longer than their male counterparts, primarily due to various factors that impact their progress. One significant factor is financial constraints. Many women face difficulties securing sufficient funds to sustain their education, creating a substantial hurdle that may lead some to leave their doctoral programs prematurely. Research has shown that financial resources significantly affect the time it takes for women to complete their terminal degrees (Maher et al. 399). Compared to men, women are more likely to rely on personal earnings, which extends their time to graduation (Bowen and Rudenstine 32).

In addition to financial constraints, women also encounter challenges, such as relationship issues and family responsibilities. Marital conflicts or family obligations, such as caring for children and managing household duties, can take time away from academic pursuits. Health issues may also complicate their journey, necessitating breaks or adjustments (Maher et al. 400).

These factors collectively contribute to the longer completion times for women in doctoral programs. They highlight the unique challenges women face, which can significantly affect their motivation and progress. Addressing these obstacles is crucial for creating a supportive environment that helps women succeed in their doctoral studies.

Efforts to support women in doctoral programs should include strategies to alleviate financial burdens, such as providing more funding options. Mentorship and support networks can also help navigate challenges related to relationships, family responsibilities, and health issues. Additionally, fostering awareness and understanding among faculty and institutions about the unique circumstances of women can create an environment that accommodates their needs.

Mentorship

Mentorship holds immense significance within academia, as highlighted by Francesco E. Marino, who considers it one of the most critical components (750). Engaging in mentorship can be beneficial and demanding for advisors, requiring investment and dedication. When a mentor and doctoral student share common interests, it can pave the way for future research opportunities and foster a meaningful relationship. According to Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., mentorship plays an essential role in transforming the educational experience, enabling doctoral mothers to maintain their journey to the completion of their program by instilling confidence in research skills and fostering a positive research attitude (64). Furthermore, active involvement in mentorship and collaboration with faculty members has been shown to increase significantly

the likelihood of new doctoral candidates completing their terminal degrees (Kluever). Maher et al. have shown that having strong relationships with faculty members and advisors positively affects completion time for female doctoral students (398).

However, mentorship is not something easily found at every institution. For Deaf doctoral students, effective mentorship may face certain barriers (Wolsey et al. 231). These barriers can include limited access to mentors fluent in ASL, difficulties in establishing relationships with mentors who may not fully understand the unique experiences of Deaf individuals, and challenges in collaborating with hearing peers and faculty who may lack familiarity with Deaf culture and communication.

Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that connects personal experiences to broader cultural, political, and social contexts. Introduced in the 1970s, it allows researchers to explore the link between individual stories and larger societal norms. Through self-reflection, researchers share the struggles and triumphs they encounter.

A key element of autoethnography is storytelling, using personal narratives to provide insights into the researcher's experiences and perspectives. This approach blends autobiography and ethnography, emphasizing the intersection of personal stories with sociocultural contexts. In our study, we use a narrative approach to share our experiences. By combining autoethnography and narrative methods, we explore the intersections of gender, disability, and parental status, focussing on the doctoral journeys of Deaf mothers from the beginning to the completion of their studies (Clandinin and Rosiek 42; Connelly and Clandinin 2).

Data Collection

Our research began with a thorough review of existing literature, which provided valuable insights to guide our research design and approach. Based on this review, we developed twenty open-ended guiding questions covering various aspects of the participants' doctoral journeys. Some questions focussed on the impact of life events or influential individuals on their decision to pursue doctoral studies, whereas others explored the guilt many doctoral mothers feel regarding their roles as mothers, wives, and students. Participants were encouraged to elaborate and provide examples to offer a deeper understanding of their experiences.

To allow for thoughtful reflection, each participant had several weeks to consider their journey and respond to the questions. After receiving their

responses, the research team carefully analyzed and reviewed them for completeness and depth. Responses were refined and rewritten when necessary to ensure clarity and coherence. This meticulous approach allowed us to capture the participants' perspectives and experiences comprehensively, providing a meaningful exploration of the research topic.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using content analysis, a qualitative research method for systematically categorizing and interpreting textual or visual data. This structured approach helps identify key themes, concepts, and patterns within various data forms, such as interviews or documents.

The process began with the team thoroughly familiarizing themselves with the data through repeated readings. They identified relevant units of analysis, such as words, phrases, or sentences, and developed a coding scheme to organize these units into meaningful categories. This manual coding process ensured that each unit was assigned to appropriate categories, forming the foundation for further analysis.

The team then examined the frequency and relationships between categories, identifying emerging patterns and themes. These findings were synthesized to generate meaningful insights, contextualized within existing literature. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, enabling the team to draw nuanced conclusions and contribute to the broader discourse.

Results

Through the analysis of the collected data, we identified nine axial codes representing recurring patterns and significant aspects within the participants' stories. These axial codes included:

- **Family support:** The importance of support from spouses, partners, or other family members in navigating the demands of doctoral studies while fulfilling family responsibilities.
- **Mentors:** The role of mentors in providing guidance, encouragement, and valuable advice throughout the doctoral journey.
- **Cohort support:** The significance of peer support and camaraderie within a cohort of fellow doctoral students.
- **Financial support:** The impact of financial resources and assistance in facilitating progress and completion of doctoral studies.
- **Anger:** The experience of anger, frustration, or resentment arising from the challenges and obstacles faced as a disabled woman.

- Job mobility: Considerations and adjustments related to employment and career mobility while pursuing doctoral studies.
- Desire for learning: The intrinsic motivation and passion for acquiring knowledge and engaging in scholarly pursuits.
- Prioritization of education: The conscious decision to prioritize education and invest time and effort in pursuing doctoral studies.
- Guilt: The persistent questioning and self-doubt regarding whether enough is being done to meet expectations in various roles and responsibilities.

These axial codes provided valuable insights into the participants' experiences, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics of support, motivation, and family attitudes in their doctoral journeys as Deaf mothers.

These axial codes were then reduced to three categories: support, motivation, and family attitude. These categories served as key themes to organize and understand the participants' experiences and perspectives. Further reducing the data, we came to the overarching theme of balancing roles. Within this broader theme, the participants' narratives highlighted the intricate and delicate nature of juggling multiple roles and responsibilities as Deaf mothers pursuing doctoral studies. This overarching theme underscored the challenges and complexities inherent in managing various aspects of their lives. Each category will be discussed next, ending with the overarching theme.

Support

Family support is crucial for navigating the demands of doctoral studies while managing family responsibilities. Ashley's then-husband was initially skeptical of her decision to pursue a doctoral program, but her determination to achieve her goals prevailed. Kim credits her father for advocating for her educational rights and encouraging her to aim higher. Clear communication with spouses was vital, as Kim and her husband agreed on a schedule to balance her studies, with him caring for their child during her study sessions. Kim noted that her son's support was challenging and inspiring as they balanced family obligations with academic pursuits, earning mutual respect.

Mentorship also plays a pivotal role in guiding doctoral students. For working mothers like Ashley, mentors were essential in navigating the challenges of academia, especially when the environment felt unaccommodating to her responsibilities as a parent. While managing the additional burden of young children, Ashley often felt pressured to prove herself as a scholar. However, the support of mentors and peers who shared similar experiences helped her overcome feelings of isolation.

Heidi's then-husband's encouragement enabled her to accept a doctoral program offer despite the distance. Beverly highlighted the sacrifices she made to focus on her studies while ensuring her family's wellbeing. Kim found a

transformative mentor in her doctoral program chair, who helped her publish multiple articles and thrive as a faculty member. Beverly, in turn, inspired another Deaf mother to pursue a doctoral program that provided targeted support for Deaf students.

Cohort support significantly contributes to the doctoral journey, fostering camaraderie among peers. Beverly's cohort included two other mothers with young children, and although their children were older, they bonded over shared experiences. Beverly emphasized the value of a strong mentor and supportive cohort in continuing her studies. Heidi recalled relying on a fellow mother during the dissertation phase, building a bond that provided mutual encouragement during a challenging transitional period.

The connections formed within a cohort can have a lasting impact. Ashley's cohort became like family, supporting each other through the highs and lows of their doctoral journey. Years after graduation, these bonds remain significant. Such support creates a nurturing environment that fosters belonging and understanding among peers facing similar challenges, contributing to a richer and more successful doctoral experience.

Financial support is another key factor in facilitating progress and completing doctoral studies. Kim's university-funded tuition enabled her to pursue her degree and secure tenure. The other researchers benefited from living in a state that offers free tuition to Deaf residents, alleviating financial stress and allowing them to focus on academic goals. Financial assistance not only reduces the burden of tuition expenses but also provides the stability needed to excel in research and academic pursuits, maximizing success in their doctoral journeys.

Motivation

The experience of anger, frustration, and resentment is familiar to individuals facing challenges in their academic pursuits. Kim's journey was far from pleasant, as she frequently felt tested on her teaching abilities, research skills, and capacity to exceed perceived limitations. The barrage of snide comments, doubts, and demanding course planning only fuelled her determination to complete her degree and prove her capabilities. Ashley's anger stemmed from workplace oppression and audism, even as she received praise for her intelligence as a Deaf individual. This anger became a powerful motivator, driving her to graduate in under three years, fuelled by a desire to overcome adversity.

These experiences highlight the emotional toll and resilience required for Deaf mothers navigating academia. Despite challenges, their determination to prove their capabilities and triumph over oppression became a potent force. The resolve to overcome barriers and achieve their goals shines through the frustration.

Job mobility and career considerations significantly influence the decision

to pursue doctoral studies. For Beverly, job offers were contingent on completing her degree within a specific timeframe, directly affecting her career trajectory. Others, like Kim, found their career progression limited without a doctoral degree. Immersed in their professions, they recognized the need for advanced education to reach their full potential.

For some, pursuing a doctorate stems from a desire for increased recognition and respect. Ashley's frustration with being overlooked and unheard in her workplace led her to pursue her studies. Once in the program, she found her voice finally acknowledged as equal to her colleagues, regardless of education levels. Heidi experienced something similar where she felt her expertise and knowledge shared were frowned upon or dismissed due to her lack of credentials. She decided to pursue a doctorate to establish respect and credibility in her field.

For others, the motivation is deeply personal. Some seek to achieve a long-standing goal, proving to themselves or others that they can attain the highest level of education. Others are driven by the desire to contribute meaningfully to their field, create new knowledge, or address gaps in existing research. Regardless of the reason, the journey of pursuing a doctorate results in a personal and professional transformation, redefining how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

Considering doctoral studies requires evaluating its impact on current jobs, career opportunities, and overall job mobility. Adjustments may be necessary to balance work and academic responsibilities, with decisions about job changes or advancements often influenced by doctoral pursuits. The intersection of job mobility and academic goals profoundly shapes professional trajectories.

The desire for learning often springs from intrinsic motivation and a passion for knowledge. For Kim, a lifelong thirst for education drove her to seek opportunities beyond her immediate environment, even in spaces where higher learning was not traditionally encouraged for women. Beverly's motivation extended beyond personal growth. As the first Deaf woman in her family to pursue a doctorate, her journey became a source of pride for her family and an inspiration for future Deaf generations on a global scale.

Family Attitude

While the prioritization of education was significant, the intersection of family attitudes and Deafness played a pivotal role in shaping participants' experiences. For instance, Kim highlighted how her family's generational Deaf identity fostered resilience and a commitment to education. However, balancing roles as Deaf doctoral student mothers added layers of complexity. Beverly shared how her advocacy for Deaf culture often intersected with her

academic work, requiring her to navigate dual responsibilities as a scholar and community leader.

For some, the decision to prioritize education is influenced deeply by family support and encouragement. Ashley's mother, for instance, helped her prepare for the financial realities of college, even though she was unaware of certain financial aid opportunities. In a family with no previous higher education experience, Ashley's passion for learning stood out as a groundbreaking endeavor. Similarly, Beverly's drive for higher education stemmed from her intrinsic love of learning, despite her family's lack of emphasis on academics due to societal expectations for women during her mother's generation. Heidi appreciated the unwavering support from her then-husband and her young son, who encouraged her to complete her doctoral education, no matter how challenging the journey became.

Overcoming societal pressures to conform to traditional roles, such as starting a family immediately after graduation, can be a powerful motivator. Kim defied these expectations, choosing to continue her education later in life with the steadfast support of her family. This unwavering encouragement was instrumental in her pursuit of advanced degrees.

The decision to prioritize education often intertwines personal determination with the understanding and support of loved ones. Family expectations can catalyze academic aspirations, while for others, the journey is fuelled by an innate passion for knowledge. Regardless of the source, the pursuit of a doctorate reflects a profound commitment to personal growth and academic achievement.

Balancing Roles

The experience of guilt about meeting expectations in various roles is a recurring theme for individuals pursuing doctoral studies. The demanding nature of doctoral programs often leads to a lack of balance between academic pursuits and personal commitments. Kim expressed the challenges of juggling multiple roles as a mother, faculty member, wife, grandmother, and doctoral student, causing self-doubt. Beverly faced the difficult decision of leaving her son behind in one state while she moved to another for her studies. This decision sometimes strained personal relationships. Ashley's marriage suffered, and constant family distractions made it hard to focus on coursework.

The guilt of not dedicating enough time to family, especially children, weighed heavily on these individuals. Ashley's daughter voiced concerns about her mother's continuous work and absence during weekends. Heidi postponed her graduation due to stress, affecting her time with her son. Unexpected challenges, like medical issues or pregnancies, disrupted carefully planned schedules. Despite the support from their families, the guilt of not being fully present for their children persisted.

Discussion

Understanding and addressing the unique experiences and needs of individuals with intersecting identities is crucial to creating inclusive and supportive environments within academia. This study sheds light on the narratives of Deaf mothers pursuing doctoral degrees, emphasizing the intersection of gender, disability, and parenthood. By examining these experiences through an intersectional lens, the findings align with existing literature and offer insights into the systemic barriers and facilitators influencing this group's academic journeys (Crenshaw 140).

The findings highlight the pivotal role of support systems, particularly family, mentors, and cohort networks, in facilitating the participants' academic success. Family support emerged as a foundational element, echoing Maher et al., who found that clear communication and shared responsibilities within families enable women to balance caregiving and academic roles (400). Similarly, mentorship was identified as a critical resource, particularly for navigating challenges unique to Deaf academics. This aligns with Ju-Lee A. Wolsey et al., who emphasize that effective mentorship is instrumental for Deaf doctoral students, helping them overcome systemic barriers and fostering academic persistence (231).

However, the findings also underscore a gap in culturally and linguistically accessible mentorship, a concern highlighted by Jemina Napier and Roz Barker (235). The challenges participants faced in securing mentors fluent in ASL or attuned to Deaf culture demonstrate the need for institutions to accommodate diverse needs better. By addressing these gaps, higher education institutions can create more equitable opportunities for Deaf scholars.

Participants' narratives reflected strong intrinsic motivation and resilience, often fuelled by experiences of frustration and anger at systemic inequities. For instance, Ashley's drive to excel despite workplace audism aligns with McCutcheon and Morrison's findings on the emotional toll of navigating academia as a mother (97). The participants' determination to challenge stereotypes and prove their capabilities illustrates the empowering potential of anger as a motivator, a theme also noted by Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (59).

The participants' career aspirations further demonstrate the intersection of motivation and job mobility. For instance, Beverly's decision to pursue her degree within a limited timeframe underscores the structural pressures faced by women balancing professional and academic goals. These findings echo Amanda M. Kulp, who highlights the unique challenges faced by academic mothers in career progression and institutional placement (90).

Family attitudes towards education played a dual role in shaping the participants' experiences. Supportive family members, as seen in both Kim's and Heidi's cases, fostered resilience and reinforced the value of education.

This finding is consistent with studies like Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., which underscore the significance of familial encouragement for doctoral mothers (59). However, the participants also faced societal pressures and expectations related to traditional gender roles, which intersected with their identities as Deaf women. For example, Beverly's advocacy for Deaf culture often required navigating dual roles as a scholar and community leader, reflecting the broader challenges of intersectionality in academia (Crenshaw 2).

The findings underscore the importance of tailored institutional support for students with intersecting identities. Addressing barriers, such as inadequate access to qualified interpreters or mentorship opportunities, can significantly enhance the academic experiences of Deaf students (Napier and Barker 236; Wolsey et al. 243). Institutions must also consider systemic changes to reduce gender biases and support work-life balance, as outlined by McCutcheon and Morrison (92).

Creating inclusive academic environments requires addressing structural and cultural barriers. For instance, expanding funding opportunities, offering mentorship training focussed on diversity, and fostering awareness of Deaf culture among faculty and peers are essential steps towards equity. Moreover, recognizing the role of intrinsic motivation and familial support can inform strategies for enhancing resilience and persistence among doctoral students.

Limitations

The cohort of doctoral students comprises four Caucasian women, and all pursued their degrees at Lamar University. This homogeneity in race, gender, and academic trajectory may shape their experiences and interactions within academic and professional contexts. All four students are mentored by the same individual, which provides consistency in guidance and feedback, potentially influencing their research interests and methodologies.

Additionally, each group member holds American citizenship and shares common cultural norms related to motherhood in the country. This shared perspective on societal expectations, gender roles, and familial dynamics likely informs their research, academic pursuits, and professional aspirations. These commonalities may also shape the focus and direction of their doctoral studies, creating a cohesive academic environment within the cohort. An additional limitation is the lack of research available on deaf students in doctoral programs, let alone deaf mothers in doctoral programs.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the narratives of four Deaf mothers, emphasizing the interplay between their identities as scholars, parents, and members of the Deaf community. By framing these experiences through an intersectional lens, we highlight how Deafness and motherhood uniquely shape their academic journeys. The findings underscore the necessity of tailored support systems that address not only gendered expectations but also cultural and linguistic barriers, offering a roadmap for creating more inclusive academic environments.

Moreover, the insights gleaned from these themes offer valuable resources and strategies for navigating the complexities of doctoral studies while fulfilling the multifaceted roles of motherhood. By shedding light on the experiences, challenges, and triumphs of these Deaf mothers, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of parenthood and academic pursuit, particularly within the Deaf community. It underscores the importance of fostering support networks, cultivating intrinsic motivation, and fostering positive familial attitudes towards education to empower individuals in their academic endeavors. Most of all, the narratives shared in this study serve as a testament to the resilience, determination, and resourcefulness of Deaf mothers pursuing advanced education, inspiring future generations, and informing efforts to create more inclusive and supportive academic environments.

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LAUREN E. BURROW

A Poet in Austyn’s Pocket: A Fantastical Tale for Mothers Who Think They’ve Lost Their Play

In dedication to my children ... this is a bedtime story I always meant to write for y’all.

This short, multichapter fairy tale is a fantastic(al), semi-autobiographical tale of a MotherScholar battling self-doubt, work demons, and a lack of creativity in the United States during the early quarantine months of the global COVID-19 pandemic. “MotherScholar” is a unique and intentional stylization of “motherscholar” (a term originally coined by Cheryl Matias, a Pinay antiracist scholar) that emphasizes, through intentional capitalization, the importance of my two identities while maintaining the original lack of spacing to signal a blended coexistence shifting towards a singular identity (Burrow and Jeffery). This fairy tale was structured in the vein of similar “social fictions” (Bhattacharya; Leavy) that are written in literary form to both entertain and educate while offering both social critique and “critical hope” (Bishundat et al.). At its heart, this is a bedtime story written to my children as I confess the tragic journey of fighting to rediscover my hope in a fairytale world of childhood poetry, song, and story as my scholarly labour was under attack and being belittled by the “work harpies.” Universally, the fairy tale should speak to those MotherScholars and mothers whose gentle and joyful scholarship and labours are often discounted and dismissed because they take creative, playful forms.

Prologue

There once was a wild child named Austyn who grew to age five and was then captured from her homeland. She was sat in neat rows and taught to memorize her times tables. She passively watched videos of science experiments being conducted by others and was told to be quiet while eating her lunches. She copied spelling words from blackboards and completed worksheets by the

hundreds. And after all the creativity had been pushed out of her mind and her appetite for play had been fully curbed, only then could she pass all the fill-in-the-bubble exams laid before her. And as congratulations for sitting so quietly and properly for all those years in her metal school desks, she was immediately rewarded with an office cubicle and nine-to-five spreadsheets in a concrete tower where her life was still run by strict schedules kept by other people's clocks. She went to work each day before the sun had even been born and was kept barely lucid under fluorescent light until that same sun had gone to bed. She worked to realize other people's dreams, to fill other people's pockets. And as time went on in the city she now lived in, she tragically lost her voice ... she couldn't see in colour ... and she had no imagination to speak of ...

*Then one day she stepped
off the subway and noticed
a rainbow in mud*

Chapter 1

Austyn paused. Something pulled her closer to a muddy puddle beside the sidewalk's curb; something was calling to the "her" of younger years, drawing closer the "her" of a life left behind. She knelt to her knees and then she saw it: a rainbow in the mud. She pressed the tip of her button-round nose to the edge of the rainbow-in-the-puddle and down she sank.

When she came out to the other side, she was surrounded by darkness save for a spark of light. And that was all it took to right Austyn's world again: a spark. For really, that is all it ever takes for change to start.

"I remember you," Austyn whispered to the tiny spark, who was not just any spark but actually was ... a poet! A poet as tiny as a pixie. A poet named Alexuel.

Austyn's soul compelled her to reach out to scoop them up from the void of darkness before they could escape her (but the poet had no intention of fluttering off to anywhere, for, in truth, they had been waiting for her to return). Not knowing what to do next, Austyn instinctively tucked them gently into her pocket. And there the poet remained as tiny as a pixie in Austyn's pocket, whispering imploringly:

Now, let's have some fun.

Count with me down from nine to one.

Chapter 2

Austyn counted down obediently, feeling herself thrust outwards and upwards the whole time. As soon as she uttered “one,” she opened her eyes and found herself back in her world of brash car horns, demanding expectations of superiors, and pointless repetitive tasks. But now, everything was different, for she had a poet in her pocket.

Throughout Austyn’s dreary workdays, Alexuel would whisper hyperbolic praises and gush magnanimous odes that wrapped around Austyn’s heart like those flowered crowns Victorian storybook children used to craft in dewy meadows. While Austyn’s bosses droned on and on with buzzy-corporate acronyms that truly meant nothing at all in countless dull and tedious meetings (which all could have been emails), Alexuel would entertain Austyn’s mind with big words, fun words like “montrosity” and “portmanteau.” Sometimes the poet would speak straight to Austyn’s soul with syllabic sonnets so sweet, and other times they would simply sing to her in verses that rhymed a little off-key. On days when even Alexuel was bored to tears by the droning soliloquys of Austyn’s micromanaging bosses, the poet in her pocket would indulge the naughty side of its pixie nature and make Austyn blush as they rattled off bawdy limericks about Titian and ladders.

At the end of the day, the poet would coax Austyn to shake off the shackles of her work-appropriate attire (pencil skirt, pantyhose, and sensible heels) and run far from the concrete tower—free in verse, in ballad, in song. Pinching her thigh skin as a signal to notice a world that was no longer in HP ink grayscale but was now ablaze with brilliant blue skies, maroon-red stop signs, and burnt sunset oranges, the poet prompted Austyn to take the road less travelled (because that is where all adventures await us!). More tiny pinches prompted Austyn to smell it all: the sharp sting of smoke from chimneys, the soft pelt of wet rain, and even the pungent punch of gasoline. Alexuel went on pinching Austyn to prompt her to take it all in: tastes, sights, and feels. But it just was not enough, so Alexuel led Austyn back to the rainbow in the mud:

It’s time to go back to a land pushed aside
to the margins of your human lives,
a land whose roadmap often fades
with all those passing years of age.
Come to a place where clots of creativity never plague the mind.
And I can holdyouthisclose the entire time.
Oh! How happy you shall be
In the Land of Poetry!
Now, count with me in your mind.
Yes, count our way up from one to nine.

Chapter 3

The poet in her pocket took her to a land where roses grow from cracks in the sidewalks and the hills that needed to be climbed left no one out of breath. Together, they went on epic adventures—rolling down hills after Jills and narrowly escaping the claws of Jabberwockies. They followed silly ol’ bears through looking glasses and chased after the disappearing Cheshire Cat.

They roused early by 6:00 a.m. to chow down on morning toast and then continued to munch on pizza crumbs the whole day through. Other days they feasted on olives and ice-boxed plums with trash goblins. They never tasted a sour milkshake and never knew the tragedy of a candy drought.

Across nine summer days, they explored the aquatics of the land,
dipped their toes in pensive ponds,
bathed in babbling brooks,
splashed in steady streams,
raced each other down roaring rivers,
and wished upon whispering waters.

Throughout eight crisp falls, they skipped through meadows of willow trees as they talked of moments frozen on Grecian urns and then lay under cherry trees to speak of roses by any other name. They spoke in couplets and tankas and called to each other in echoed rhymes. They listened to Psalms sung by sheep and proverbs preached. They would lift every voice and sing til earth and heaven ring. And when they got the urge to hurl curses at the stars or simply shout aloud with unbridled “crazy woman’s” rage—oh! how they would let their beautiful, unjudged rage just

RAGE!
RAGE!
RAGE!

They would explain their tirades to no one but simply go back along their merry ways.

And so, throughout a week of winter dusks, they danced with eagles, nightingales, ravens, and flamingosexuals under the magic mirror of the moon, adorned in its radiant beam, until they crashed into lullabied sleep, content in the beauty of truth and the truth of beauty.

Six hundred unbirthdays past and then the poet in her pocket introduced Austyn to some of their dear, dear cousins in adjacent towns—towns filled with old English manors that housed wardrobes of fur winter coats, towns protected by fairytale knights, and towns with secret gardens tended by

sleeping beauties and little women. They spent days and nights travelling in perfect cozy train seats to sleepy hollows and haunted villages where they crept down dark alleys and came across black cats with tell-tale hearts. They bit back at vampires and once helped hide a sugarplum fairy being pursued by a rat king.

When spring blossomed into the sixth of May, they boarded the Dawn Treader and set sail up into the skies, past the second star on the right, and straight onto morning. Sirens beckoned to their passing ship as they sailed onwards to islands with monsters that promised to eat them up because they loved them so. They flew to planets with foxes and princes and roses kept in glass containers, planets that housed caves of solitude, and planets where black panthers were perfecting mind-boggling technological advancements.

At five o'clock, the autumn airs started to cool, so they hitched a pumpkin carriage to the tips of lightning thieves and returned down to solid land, where men in lincoln green taught them to shoot arrows that whistled through outlawed trees. They trip-trapped across drawbridges past ogres fighting billy goats and on into a stone castle where they sat around a round table and engaged in deep discussions with four horsemen about love, loyalty, and legends.

It was all so beautiful—soft like a dream while bold as real life and always full of possibility. It was a holy, idealistic trinity, so it had to come to an end because throughout their time together,

throughout the many chords of concrete things,
 throughout the many strings tied into memory,
 throughout the many, many fantastical melodies,

as Austyn began to take notice that she was finally getting her voice back—stronger and more precise than ever; she was once again seeing colours in all their brightness, vibrancy, and shades, and her imagination had regrown into one that even a girl from Green Gables would envy. Others had taken notice of these truths, too!

Chapter 4

Then, one day, while Austyn and Alexuel sat along Walden Pond engaging with Gus, the theatre cat, in witty banter and comical word play, they heard a terrifying ripping sound in such discord with the joy and harmony of poetry that it instantly heralded forth unspeakable tragedies: Ancient lovers' hearts broke, everlasting oaths shattered, and tinkling fairies fell to the ground with their life bells snuffed out. The excruciating sound, like nails on a chalkboard, was soon joined by an equally distasteful sight. Through the streaks that now shredded the soft, pastel sky, icy silver claws of harpies appeared. The claws

tightened into fists at the end of long, scaly arms and punched down through the tears in the sky and swung about wildly in all directions in search of their prey. The harpies cared not about whatever destruction and misery resulted from their reckless swipes for they were singularly determined to recapture and drag this land's newest resident back to a cubicled-life of droning boredom. When they finally managed to wrestle their perfectly toned bodies (resulting from years of depriving themselves of sweets and happiness of any kind) through the cavities they had carved into the formerly lovely sky, it took Austyn but one look at their judgmental, disapproving eyes to know that they would not hesitate to drain every last drop of poetic freedom from any who dared stand in their way. Their laser-focussed purpose was painfully obvious; they were here to reclaim her, their prisoner, that they callously referred to as Minion #987654321.

Austyn knew that her happiness, content, and strength had summoned the harpies here. Her growth threatened the harpies' way of life, for if they could not dictate the when and where of those under their middle-management control, then their precious paychecks and fancy titles would certainly disappear with them into an existence full of impotence and unnecessary waste. And so, knowing that her withdrawal from the Land of Poetry was the only way to protect her friends from the nearing whirlwind of destruction and misery, but not yet resigned to the impending Fates, Austyn cried with tears rolling down her cheeks as her hands grasped about for something concrete to hold onto: "I don't want to go. Please, I don't want to go Alexuel!"

Kind, kind Alexuel gently wiped Austyn's cheeks, clasped her hands with a soft squeeze, and gently explained:

Dwelling solely in this land or the other, you cannot survive

You must go back to the real world and revise! Revise!

You must take from this land all its possibility

And somehow make it into your reality.

You must return to the land of age.

But, never fear. You will no longer be caged.

For now, you know a secret of critical hope:

A balance of ideals and actions that will help you to cope.

"But I'm no poet," Austyn self-criticized. "You must come with me. You must help me never lose my way again. The world needs poets in their pockets to always hold onto them this tight."

But the pixie-sized poet only shook their head "no," forcing Austyn to hurry up her internal journey towards peace with this untimely, harpy-imposed departure from the land she loved so dear. Then a burst of negotiation struck

her, and Austyn implored over the harpies' screeches (they were trying so desperately to drown her out), "But I can come back, right?!" To which Alexuel giddily replied:

Yes, of course, whenever you need to, my dear!
I'll always be exactly right here.

Now, join me in happy number counting against the setting sun
as we count our way down from nine to one.

Chapter 5

Austyn's lavender-coloured eyes opened widely and darted frantically about because she could still hear the unbearable, high-pitched screeching all around her. It was the screech of bus brakes trekking along the city streets and splashing a muddy puddle next to the scorching sidewalk where Austyn stood. She breathed in a deep sigh of relief. She reflexively touched her side for reassurance, but the poet in her pocket was no longer there. Surprisingly, though, Austyn did not feel alone, and she did not feel abandoned. Instead, her hands at her side instinctively turned into fists placed upon her hips, her chest puffed forwards, and her chin pointed to the sky—and there she stood next to a muddy puddle with a rainbow in it, in a superhero pose. She held her stance for a count of nine and then strode into her revised life with renewed purpose and a power infinitely better than prose.

The next day at work when the monstrous bosses prattled their demands at her, Austyn reached deep inside and borrowed from the allegories, pantoums,¹ and cinquains of the poet in her pocket and spoke them—all on her own. Her bosses scurried away to preserve their dignity, but their gaping mouths betrayed their fears and confusion, for they knew not what to do when confronted by Austyn's undaunted truth. Her bosses quickly tried to dismiss the power shift with claims of "Oh my word! She's so insane!" But other colleagues quickly reframed the disparaging narrative the bosses had hoped would take hold and countered with "Listen to how Austyn speaks now. Boldly! Concretely. Succinctly. Confidently! Vividly! She's a woman to take notice of now."

Over the years, the doubters and the nay-sayers still made attempts to steal away her creativity and threaten her joy, but Austyn always dispatched them all with a quick thumb through her poetic lexicon until she landed upon just the right words to proclaim her power, confirm her contributions, and validate her value and worth. Her uncanny ability to make sense from even the most complicated situations with a poetic metaphor or simile eventually earned her a promotion or two. When Austyn chose to speak with Alexuel's kindness (for

no one speaks as kindly of others as a poet who is fluent in odes), she felt happiest, experienced the best of times, and collected the most friends.

Austyn never did return to the Land of Poetry through the muddy puddle with the rainbow in it. Nay, instead, she found herself drawn to companions and colleagues whom she sensed had all once had poets in their pockets, too. In their company, her heart was encircled with wreaths of flowery sonnets. In their conversations, she found an everlasting supply of clever and creative words that spoke to her mind beautifully. She even crossed paths one day with a partner who made her cackle with spicy limericks, and they wooed each other with ballads of love. Years later, she gave birth to her lovely little sprite whom she taught to visit the Land of Poetry every night.

Austyn would whisper as she kissed Aleighallton's cheek and clicked off the bedroom light: "Remember, only during dream times, though, my love. You can stay in that Land of Poetry until Grandfather Twilight places his moon pearl gently above the sea, but then you must return to me. You must use your lyrical wit to fight the injustices of our world and your poetic curiosity to solve all our problems here. You must share the rhymes you learn there to bring smiles to strangers as they pass near. You must always promise to awaken in the morn, for this world needs poets in it, too—and that's why you were born."

Epilogue

The years passed, as they are wont to do. And on that day when Alexuel sensed Austyn's light had finally gone out, all the inhabitants of the land gathered around—the lilac, the white rabbit, and Ms. Everdeen—and Alexuel proclaimed to them all:

Come now and dry your eye sockets!
We gather around to speak not of her in elegy,
for those who lived with a poet in their pocket
live on for eternity!
And so together we all shall dwell,
(night and day)
living life so well
in eternal hope and forever play.

Notes

This story was initially inspired by the writer, Armani Scott. It is dedicated to my kindred poets Naomi Shihab Nye and Justin Jannise and all the other poets I wish I could keep in my pocket and is wrapped up in thanks to my peers of Stephen F. Austin State University's ENGL 5366 who were so willing to play along with me and to all the storybook authors, songwriters, and movie-makers who have lent their words to me since childhood (all references to their works are made with the most sincere homage and gratitude). Finally, dear readers, the writing of this tale was a reflective, redemptive, and restorative act for me as an author. With gratitude and joy, I now call to you to join me and my children to long live—night and day—in a life of eternal hope and forever play.

Endnotes

1. “The pantoum is a poem of any length, composed of four-line stanzas in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza. The last line of a pantoum is often the same as the first” (“Pantoum”).

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MARIA COLLIER DE MENDONÇA, CAROLINA DANTAS DE FIGUEIREDO,
AND CAMILA INFANGER ALMEIDA

The University as a Place for Mothers: Reflections from the Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project in Brazil¹

The Mothering, Media and Childhood Extension Project explores the cultural meanings and social representations of motherhood in the media. Our work abides by the Brazilian higher education extension guidelines (i.e., inseparability of teaching, research, and extension; dialogical interactions; interdisciplinarity, interprofessional collaboration; student training; and social transformation) and falls within motherhood, childhood, and media studies. We aim to broaden the public discussion on mothering, media, and childhood from an interdisciplinary perspective. We seek to raise social awareness of the challenges mothers face in universities to encourage the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE) administration to develop policies to support academic mothers. Since 2021, we have produced five seasons of radio programs and podcasts for the Paulo Freire Radio Station at the UFPE, audiovisual material for social media, and published book chapters and papers in conference proceedings and academic journals. In December 2022, we met with mothers who were students, employees, and professors at UFPE. The insights raised in this meeting informed the development of an exhibition titled “The University as a Place for Mothers,” which was launched on March 8, 2023, at UFPE. The exhibition shed light on the challenges mothers face in our university. In 2023, we also organized five mother circles and discussed the need for new policy development concerning mothers’ demands in collaboration with the rector’s office and the governance committee in 2024. In 2025, we will participate in the UFPE Parenting Policy Working Group.

Introduction

This article presents the lessons learned from the Mothering, Media and Childhood Extension Project (known as @mmi.ufpe) held between 2021 and 2024. We start with the theoretical and methodological framework of the project: the three missions of higher education institutions in Brazil (i.e., teaching, research, and extension), the guidelines for extension in Brazilian universities, and how we have linked them to knowledge sharing and expansion in the fields of motherhood, media, and childhood studies. Next, we report our experience of the project, outlining how we have approached the academic community and management body and engaged in the debate on the difficulties and challenges faced by mothers at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE).

The Guidelines of Extension Activities in the Brazilian Higher Education Sector

The Brazilian higher education sector includes public and private institutions, such as universities, federal institutes, university centres, and colleges. There are over three hundred public higher education institutions (HEIs) divided into federal, state, and municipal institutions. The government is responsible for operating and maintaining public institutions, which provide free access to higher education. Federal, state, and municipal universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in several areas. Given their pivotal role in research, science, and innovation, the major federal agencies—CAPES (the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) and CNPq (the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development)—help fund public universities (Higher Education in Brazil, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

University extension is the third mission of Brazilian universities, as established by the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, which formally recognizes the inseparability of research, teaching, and extension as the three pillars for HEIs nationally. As stated in the Constitution: “Universities shall have didactic, scientific, administrative, financial and property management autonomy and shall comply with the principle of inseparability of teaching, research and extension activities” (The Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, art. 207, ch. III, sec. I)

In the Brazilian context, academic extension activities contribute to a critical interpretation of the world, as they recognize sociocultural diversity, upend traditional teaching methods, expand research fields, and promote collective and community values training for participants (de Deus 624–33). Extension activities bridge teaching practices and knowledge sharing with different social groups beyond the university. Consequently, the teaching–research–

extension triad enables a shared space for mutual listening and learning, expanding knowledge exchange and dialogue between society and the public universities.

The work of @mmi.ufpe follows the guidelines for extension in higher education established by the Brazilian Ministry of Education in 2018: dialogical interaction, interdisciplinarity and interprofessionalism, inseparability between teaching, research and extension, student training impact, and social transformation impact. In this sense, Sandra de Deus points out that extension activities deal with sociocultural and ethnic-racial diversity and promote the formation of collegiate citizenship among students, professors, and staff and community members who participate in the everyday transformation of the university and society. She also emphasizes that the knowledge created through extension activities is based not only on daily experiences but also on the ability to narrate extension experiences involving objective and subjective aspects and the active participation of students, scholars, and listeners (631).

In this regard, our project has Rádio Paulo Freire as a partner, whose history began with initial experiences of extension, proposed by the Brazilian philosopher and pedagogue Paulo Freire, a professor at our university in the early 1960s. Freire became an important educator internationally. His groundbreaking work publications have been translated into more than forty languages, indicating the global impact of his ideas (Gadotti and Torres 1255–56).

Rádio Paulo Freire’s Mission Is Based on Freirean Philosophy

Rádio Universitária AM 820 was established in 1962 under Paulo Freire, who was director of the Cultural Extension Service at the University of Recife (the former name of UFPE) (Lima et al. 65–66). It was a pioneering extension experiment and participated in Freire’s educational project, *Cultura Popular e Alfabetização* (*Popular Culture and Literacy*). The project aimed to empower vulnerable social groups through literacy and educational initiatives. Freire’s early extension activities in Recife inspired concepts in Freirean pedagogy, which formed the theoretical foundation of the Brazilian university extension guidelines. Due to the 1964 military coup in Brazil, Freire was arrested and exiled to Chile (Gadotti and Torres 1255–1267).

In 2018, the radio station was renamed “Rádio Paulo Freire,” thus aligning its mission with Freirean philosophy. The radio station is now part of the UFPE University Television and Radio Hub and is managed by faculty members from the Department of Social Communication. The objectives are to provide more inclusive and transformative public broadcasting services and stimulate public debate on topics often silenced by mainstream media, such as

respect for human rights and gender and racial diversity, among other relevant issues. The radio school operates as a research, innovation, and experimentation laboratory, producing innovative programs and fostering interdisciplinary learning while connecting students, scholars, and society through media production and extension projects.

As Freire's philosophy emphasizes dialogue and the active participation of students and the community in the learning process, the radio station team produces programs of public interest, fostering democracy, and diversity of voices. The radio school serves as a training platform for students and encourages their autonomy, following Freirean pedagogy based on freedom, autonomy, and critical thinking (Lima et al). Furthermore, it promotes popular culture to create collective knowledge, also expressed in its slogan 'the radio station we create together' (66, translated by the authors).

The Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project's Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The @mmi.ufpe project's theoretical basis encompasses motherhood, media, and childhood studies. As defined by Andrea O'Reilly, motherhood studies is interdisciplinary and interprofessional. Its scope is broad and involves a variety of disciplines, including communication, social sciences, humanities, gender studies, feminism, and women's studies. Three main themes predominate in this field: the critical discussion of public policies, laws, ideologies, and images that sustain maternal oppression by reinforcing patriarchal values; the study of daily experiences associated with mothering and motherwork; and the repercussions that becoming a mother has on women's identities, subjectivities, self-esteem, and self-image (O'Reilly, "Twenty-First" 1-3).

This article reports our journey and highlights our current concerns. It is important to mention the collective character of our trajectory, which involves conversations with many individuals and groups, both nationally and internationally. Our project aims to deconstruct the ten ideological assumptions of patriarchal motherhood (O'Reilly, "It Saved" 187), and we understand the term "mother" as a verb (Ruddick). We are also actively working to raise awareness of the importance of policies to support academic mothers among our audiences.

In this context, we understand that although the media influences the everyday experiences of mothers and children—often reinforcing patriarchal, consumerist and neoliberal values—social media can also create spaces for a new collective debate and raise awareness of the relevance of policies to support academic mothers. Therefore, we have been connecting with research groups and collectives of university mothers and mothers who are artists and activists to discuss maternal issues across Brazil and internationally.

Media and childhood studies form an interdisciplinary and interprofessional field that investigates children's and teenagers' interactions with the media. This field is currently under consolidation internationally, bringing together academia, the private sector, civil society, government, and other social actors in constant dialogue with communication studies, education, social sciences, and law (Buckingham; Guedes and Covaleski).

The Launching of @mmi.ufpe during Social Distancing in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The experiences of pandemic mothering (O'Reilly and Green) motivated the first edition of @mmi.ufpe. In the early stages of the pandemic, mothers, more than everyone else, were forced to prioritize the survival of their children and families within a social context that pressured them to perform under the unreasonable new normal rules because they had to perform carework both inside and outside their homes (Collier de Mendonça and Oliveira-Cruz, "The Challenges" 287–308).

In August 2021, we launched @mmi.ufpe while working remotely. Our team included undergraduate and postgraduate students, professors from the Department of Communication at UFPE and collaborators from other universities across Brazil. We produced monthly live discussions, broadcasted on YouTube, and the first season of programs and podcasts for Rádio Paulo Freire, which were recorded from home. At the same time, we created the project profile @mmi.ufpe on Instagram.

The pandemic resulted in a substantial decline in the academic productivity of students, researchers, and professors who are mothers (Staniscuaski et al.). At that time, the Brazilian federal government was governed by an extreme far-right party, which caused significant damage to public universities and Brazilian research and science funding. Despite all these difficulties and challenges, in 2022, mothers were required to return to campus and resume their lives and academic work (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo, "Lugar de Mãe").

From Active Listening to Visibility and Spatial Occupation of the Campus in the Second Year of @mmi.ufpe Activities

In September 2022, we started live broadcasting from the Paulo Freire radio station. As we expanded our networking with collectives of university mothers and motherhood scholars in the second season, we discussed the challenges faced by academic mothers across Brazil. During this process, we identified the need to organize the first in-person meeting of academic mothers at UFPE, which took place on December 14, 2022. The meeting brought together professors, students, and researchers who shared their experiences of

being mothers at UFPE. It was a touching moment in which the participants expressed their difficulties, challenges, and hopes. They felt exhausted, lonely, and unsupported at the university. They suffered from physical and psychological stress, insecurity, and anxiety.

An undergraduate student who was a visual artist highlighted the invisibility of maternal issues on campus and emphasized that mothers were not recognized as part of the academic environment. Colleagues agreed the university was an unwelcoming environment that did not have empathy for their constant juggling of mothering, studying, as well as domestic and paid work. As we understood how demanding the routines of student mothers were at UFPE, we decided to engage with the academic community, appealing to their aesthetic and emotional sensitivities.

At the time, the number of collectives of university mothers and research networks was growing in Brazil. We approached Marta Mencarini, professor and visual artist at the University of Brasília, whose work with the collectives *Arte e Maternagem* and *Matriz* helped us develop the creative insights for designing the exhibition *The University as a Place for Mothers*. The objective was to visually express maternal narratives, collectively constructed by mothers, and to question the individualization and depoliticization of patriarchal motherhood in the exhibition's design. The production of contemporary mother artists is characterized by narratives that question dominant artistic representations of motherhood (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo). Utilizing autobiographical narratives and collective works, these artists give materiality and visibility to maternal ambivalences and their lived experiences, using their maternal bodies as supports and inspirations to create everyday performances of mothering and question patriarchal motherhood (Collier de Mendonça, Leão, and de Carlos 188–89).

In this perspective, Mencarini explored collective strategies employed by artist mothers to reconcile artistic production with mothering experience in the challenging scenario of the pandemic in her doctoral research:

Exhausted, yet we persist in our struggle, forming coalitions and self-improving along on this journey that we never take alone. It is imperative to address the daily challenges faced by women who bear children, give birth, nurture, raise, and sustain life on Earth. The valorisation of reproductive labour and the demand for better living conditions for all people can be regarded as an act of resistance against the contemporary necropolitics of the contemporary, patriarchal, and neoliberal colonial system. The question of motherhood, in our understanding, encompasses the collective human experience. (Mencarini and Medeiros 121)

The exhibition “The University as a Place for Mothers” was launched on International Women’s Day, March 8, 2023, at Capibaribe Gallery in UFPE’s Arts and Communication Centre. It was paramount to name the exhibition with a striking title to express the issue under debate clearly and affirm the belonging of mothers in the academy. Feminist and egalitarian theoretical references also inspired the title. According to Djamila Ribeiro, the expression “lugar de fala” (“place of speech”) possibly emerged from debates on diversity, critical race theory, and decolonial thinking. In this sense, Patricia Hill Collins clarifies the following:

The feminist standpoint theory must be discussed from the perspective of groups within power relations. It would also be recommendable to understand the categories of race, gender, class and sexuality as elements of the social structure that emerge as fundamental devices that favour inequalities and create groups, rather than thinking of these categories as writings of identity applied to individuals. (qtd. in Ribeiro 60–61)

As O’Reilly argues, mothers face specific problems that affect their subjectivities and identities in psychological, social, economic, political and cultural realms (“Matricentric Feminism” 13–26). Mothers suffer overlapping oppressions by patriarchy because they are women and because they are mothers. Maternal oppression also persists in universities because motherhood is intertwined with gender, race, ethnicity, geographical location, and socio-economic factors that restrict academic opportunities for women. Hence, through our initiatives, we advocate for developing policies to support mothers so that universities can offer equal opportunities for them.

Communication Strategy

The exhibition was an invitation to start a new dialogue with the academic community. The initiative revealed the motivations, needs, and challenges shared by mothers at UFPE and presented a list of over thirty suggestions for policies to support academic mothers. Upon the exhibition’s inauguration, we delivered a learning report to the rector, Dr. Alfredo Gomes, and vice-rector, Dr. Moacyr Araújo (Collier de Mendonça et al. 2023).

According to the Brazilian Institute of Museums (IBRAM), planning an exhibition involves defining concepts and applying methods and techniques to choose physical spaces and objects that express ideas and images and build a narrative to sensitize its audience. The exhibition concept brought together design and communication planning skills that created a narrative combining Instagram and Facebook posts, news on campus newspapers, an exhibition of artwork by mothers, a report delivered to the rector’s office, and episodes of

our radio programs (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo, “Lugar de Mãe”).

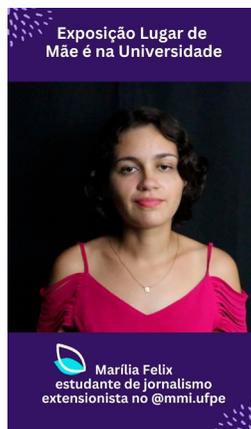
Using the visual arts as powerful media resources, we raised identity awareness to arouse feelings and engage the academic community in listening to powerful maternal testimonies. We included artwork by undergraduate mothers from the graphic expression and visual arts programmes of UFPE and the collectives Matriz and Arte e Maternagem (made up of artist mothers from Brazilian Universities) and maternal narratives gathered in the December meeting and the findings presented by the academic movement Parent in Science’s² quantitative research (Staniscuaski et al.). We also created a campaign with fifteen videos, including the video *Being a Mother at the University*, for the @mmi.ufpe social networks (Figure 1).



Aline Melo (journalism student and

@mmi.ufpe extension project member: “Being a mother in the university is challenging, chaotic, tiring, productivity reducing, and a constant reminder that not everything will be 100 per cent accomplished.”

Aline: “These were some of the testimonies from UFPE mothers! Among the challenges and difficulties, hopes and joys, being a mom in the university means to learn that equal opportunities are not yet a reality.”



Marília Félix (journalism student and

@mmi.ufpe extension member): “But it [being a mother] is also a trigger for hope, a desire for revolution, the will to fight barriers and be able to offer children a prosperous environment. It’s a source of pride!”

Marília: “The testimonies are important because they gather all the perceptions of what it’s like to be a mother at UFPE. Understanding these perceptions is the first step towards starting a dialogue about what it’s like to be a mother with the academic community and university management.”

Figure 1: *Being a Mother at the University* video. Testimonies from participants

TODA CRISE SOCIAL ATINGE MAIS AS MULHERES

Home office
atividades escolares das crianças
cuidados com os idosos

TRABALHO DOMÉSTICO

PANDE (MÃE)NICAS

*** AUMENTO DA VIOLÊNCIA DE GÊNERO, O ISOLAMENTO FÍSICO INTENSIFICA A MASCULINIDADE TÓXICA E UMA RESPOSTA VIOLENTA AO CONFLITO**

AUMENTO DE 22% NOS CASOS DE FEMINICÍDIO NO BRASIL

***36%**
das mães deixam de procurar emprego na crise e 16% das mães topam trocar por empregos menos demandantes para cuidarem dos filhos sendo que só **9%** dos pais consideram a opção

***7 MILHÕES** de mulheres deixaram seus postos de trabalho no início da pandemia

2 milhões a mais do que o número de homens na mesma situação

***METADE DAS MULHERES NO BRASIL PASSOU A CUIDAR DE ALGUÉM DURANTE A PANDEMIA**

***39%** das mães apresentam exaustão e estresse pós traumático

*** Dados ONU Mulher, PNAD Continua, FBSP e revista TPM.**

O QUE VOCE FAZ PARA MELHORAR A EXISTÊNCIA DAS MÃES ?

COLTIVO MATRIZ **ARTE**

Figure 2: Collective Work by Artist-Mothers

Pande(mãe)nicas, Lambe-Lambe, various formats. Author and source: Collective Matriz, 2021. Image courtesy of Professor Marta Mencarini (UnB), member of Collective Matriz, Brasilia.

On March 9, 2023, UFPE's press office (ASCOM) published an article about the exhibition on the university's website, endorsing the positive reaction of the exhibition at UFPE (Figure 3).

Notícias

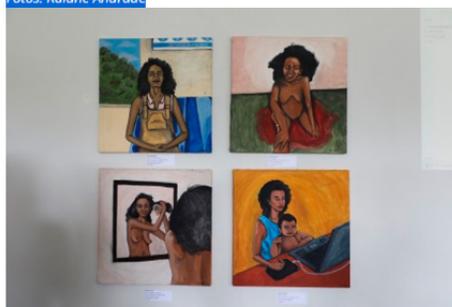
Exposição “Lugar de mãe é na Universidade” é inaugurada no Centro de Artes e Comunicação

O objetivo é mostrar adversidades enfrentadas por mães universitárias, docentes e técnicas, incluindo falta de apoio acadêmico e dificuldade em alinhar estudos e cuidados maternos

📅 09/03/2023 ⌚ 15:55

Ascom

Fotos: Raiane Andrade



Obras mostram dia a dia das mães que estudam e trabalham

A exposição “Lugar de mãe é na Universidade” começou ontem (8), no Centro de Artes e Comunicação (CAC) da UFPE, numa promoção do projeto de extensão Maternagem, Mídia e Infância (MMI), contando com cartazes, obras de arte e propostas de debates relacionadas à maternidade na Universidade. Na abertura do evento, estiveram presentes o

Figure 3: The Exhibition “The University as a Place for Mothers” Inaugurated at the Centre for Arts and Communication Source: ASCOM UFPE, 2023.

The article emphasizes that the exhibition aimed to expose the challenges faced by students, professors and staff members who are mothers, including the lack of academic support and the struggle to balance studies and carework. Over 150 people signed the exhibition visitors' book. In addition to the presence of the rector and vice-rector, staff from different centres and departments, professors, and students attended the exhibition's opening (Figure 4). The rector, Dr. Alfredo Gomes, emphasized the need for the university to address gender asymmetries by incorporating the needs of women who are mothers into its policies. Historically, these women have been adversely affected by the lack of adequate policies, resulting in their withdrawal from the academic environment and difficulties for staff and professors in advancing their careers.

Incorporating visual arts into the exhibition and social media communication was an effective and relevant method to introduce this dialogue.



Figure 4: Opening of the Exhibition “The University as a Place for Mothers”
Photo by Raiane Andrade. Source: ASCOM UFPE, 2023.

The Rector’s Interview in Season Three and the Project’s Next Steps

After the positive outcome of the exhibition, we produced the third season of the radio program and included interviews with specific groups of mothers at UFPE, such as undergraduate students, postgraduate students, professors and university staff. The interview with Gomes took place in the last episode of the season—titled “Support Policies for Mothers at UFPE: Where to Start?” and broadcast on May 10, 2023—after our understanding of the consensual and specific needs of each group of mothers had improved.

Maria Collier de Mendonça, coordinator of @mmi.ufpe, and Camila Infanger Almeida, a doctoral student in political science at the University of São Paulo and researcher at Parent in Science Movement, participated in the program. The general needs related to the university infrastructure were discussed, including breastfeeding/lactation rooms and changing tables in washroom facilities, access for children to the university restaurant, and other child-friendly facilities. The following discussion addressed developing policies to encourage the retention of undergraduate student mothers. We emphasized the importance of financial resources for retention grants and childcare provisions and highlighted the need for a maternity leave policy to prevent university drop out among undergraduate student mothers.

Next, we discussed the challenges faced by postgraduate students who need to balance the demands of mothering and family responsibilities with academic productivity, such as attending academic events and publishing articles.

We also mentioned the difficulties faced by researchers who are mothers when applying for international research internships. Considering professors, we stressed the importance of extending the submission deadlines for scholarship and research funding notices to ensure equal opportunities for women-mothers.

The rector stressed the impact of the resource cuts made during the Bolsonaro government, which continue to affect Brazilian universities and scientific funding. However, he also recognized the importance of supporting mothers through the development of institutional policies. At the end of the episode, Gomes invited us to continue talking to the UFPE governance committee, formed by eight pro-rectories (i.e., undergraduate, postgraduate, extension, student affairs, research and innovation, administration, human resources and quality of life, budget planning and finance), representatives of the three campuses (located in Recife, Caruaru, and Vitória, and the eleven centres (i.e., arts and communication, biosciences, exact and natural sciences, law, health, medicine, applied social sciences, education, philosophy and humanities, IT, technology, and geosciences). We concluded by suggesting that the UFPE management could include maternal issues in the public debate through Gomes's participation in the rectors' forums and his connections with policymakers from the municipal, state, and federal governments, the Ministry of Education, and other institutions.

In July 2023, we organized five online mother circles to extend our dialogue with mothers in the academic community. In addition, we participated in a conversation circle at the UFPE Education Centre in August 2023 with thirty mothers (pedagogy students and professors) who founded the UFPE's Maternity Collective, currently comprising ninety-six members, including students, faculty, and staff. The collective is managed through WhatsApp and Instagram.

We continued the work of @mmi.upfe, producing the fourth and fifth seasons of the program throughout 2023 and 2024. On March 8, 2024, we presented the findings from the mother circles and key extension activities to the rector and the UFPE governance committee team.

In December 2024, the UFPE Parenting Working Group was established under the leadership of the pro-rector for student affairs, Dr. Cinthia Kalyne de Almeida Alves. The group's mission is to develop an institutional plan of actions to support students in mothering and parenting in the university environment. It aims to reduce dropout rates, foster academic development, and limit social inclusion. The group consists of representatives and directors from various disciplines (such as education, health sciences, IT, philosophy and human sciences, medical sciences, and nursing), as well as strategic university management departments (such as the pro-rectories of undergraduate studies, postgraduate studies, human resources, student affairs, and the central

library and the departments of infrastructure and finance). The group also includes coordinators of extension projects, such as Amamentar (focussed on breastfeeding support), Instituto Papai (focused on masculinity and gender equality issues), and Maternagem, Mídia e Infância (Mothering, Media, and Childhood).

Key Lessons of the Mother Circles from December 2022 and July and August 2023

The first face-to-face meeting took place on December 14, 2022, with sessions held in the morning and afternoon. The morning session had five participants, while the afternoon session had ten. The attendees ranged from undergraduate students from the performing arts, architecture and urbanism, information science, and social sciences programmes, as well as postgraduate students from the music, architecture and urbanism, and geography programs. The faculty members were from the social communication, architecture, and urbanism programs.

The meetings were facilitated by Maria Collier de Mendonça and Carolina Dantas de Figueiredo, who drew inspiration from Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric pedagogy, which encourages mothers to listen to each other and share their experiences. It aims to help them understand, criticize, question, and challenge patriarchal motherhood, as well as wider power structures and inequalities. The approach emphasises the importance of collective support in creating an encouraging environment where individuals can support each other and value different experiences, feelings, and ideas without judgment. It fosters connections, learning, and collective self-expression.

Between July 24 and July 31, 2023, we facilitated five online mother circles, four sessions with participants from the Recife campus, and one session with women from the Caruaru campus. Twenty-seven mothers participated, including six university staff members, four professors, eleven undergraduate students, and six postgraduate students. The participants were enrolled in various programs, including pedagogy, mathematics, physiotherapy, social work, graphic expression, geography, literature, psychology, biological sciences, and information science. The professors came from communication, physiotherapy, mathematics, architecture and urbanism, and anatomy, while the university staff members belonged to technical and administrative services. We created a welcoming listening space based on shared solidarity, an experience that evoked intense emotions. We also took notes of the conversations with the participants' consent to produce reports on the lessons learned and to share the collectively built knowledge with the academic community and management team.

Key Lessons from the Mother Circles

Despite the varied areas of study, life stages, and careers among students, faculty members, and staff, shared challenges emerged. Consequently, we noted the growing mutual support among mothers across different academic levels, family structures, and socioeconomic backgrounds throughout the mother circles. From the outset of the meetings, the burden of managing domestic, maternal, professional, and academic responsibilities was particularly salient among the participants. The most prevalent topics included feelings of exhaustion, loneliness, distress, ambivalence, and guilt. But the participants also spoke about resilience, persistence, empowerment, the desire for belonging, as well as the need for support and solidarity in the university environment (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo, “Lugar de Mãe”; Collier de Mendonça et al., “Rodas de conversas”).

The conversations emphasized that the mother circles were the first opportunity they had to come together and share their maternal experiences at UFPE. Undergraduate student mothers reported facing more mental health issues, financial difficulties, and a greater need for general assistance in comparison to other groups of mothers. For instance, mothers attending evening classes were in a more vulnerable condition and more likely to drop out of their programs. Low-income sole mothers studying in Recife, particularly those from the countryside or living in neighbouring cities, away from campus, reported even greater challenges.

At the end of the meetings, we discussed policy recommendations to support mothers studying or working at the UFPE. Financial and psychological support recommendations were predominant, along with the need to build an adequate university infrastructure (including breastfeeding/lactation facilities, daycare centres, and changing tables in washrooms). In sum, our key takeaway was recognizing the significant lack of support—psychological, financial, infrastructural, and academic—available to mothers at UFPE (Collier de Mendonça et al., “Relatório de Aprendizados”).

Our team compiled a list of suggestions and grouped the problems highlighted into two themes in the report delivered to the rectory. The first encompasses human resources and institutional solutions, whereas the second requires financial resources for infrastructural solutions. The first group includes the following initiatives: creating support groups for student mothers; preparing guidelines for professors, advisors, program coordinators, and directors of centres to assist student mothers; extending deadlines in cases of child health issues; simplification of language in notices and communication of policies to support mothers; allowing maternity leave for undergraduate students; effectively communicating the right to maternity leave and extending defence deadlines for mothers in postgraduate programmes; encouraging the

academic potential of postgraduate students and professors upon their return to campus after maternity leave; creating policies to enable mothers to address asymmetries in academic productivity after childbirth, and having continuous dialogue between the UFPE management and university mothers' collective.

The following suggestions are included in the second group: collecting data to identify the number and needs of student mothers, administrative employees, and faculty members at UFPE; collecting data on student dropout due to pregnancy and motherhood at UFPE; constructing changing tables and family washrooms, breastfeeding/lactation rooms, and child-friendly facilities on campus (playgrounds and libraries); creating partnerships with daycare centres located near the campus, and other student support services (including financial aid and psychological counselling); developing protocols and inclusive policies in funding schemes; and increasing funding opportunities for mothers, considering such factors as race, disability, family formation, and income levels.

Current Scenario: Persistence and Resilience during the Fourth Year of Activities

We have been participating in several debates with collectives of university mothers, activists, and research networks at roundtables and events across Brazil. The collectives of university mothers are already showing the first results, both in local and national contexts. In 2024, a window was opened by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) for representatives of collectives to participate in a working group to identify ways to enhance the experiences of mothers in the universities and tackle the high dropout levels of student mothers. The working group organized five regional online forums, which resulted in formal guidelines for the national policy on maternal permanence in Brazilian higher education institutions.

The Brazilian collectives of university mothers have engaged in continuous debates on the rights of academic mothers to propose practical transformation (Silva). Brazilian activist mothers have been sharing challenges experienced in everyday life, building collective knowledge, including political action, within the university environment, and criticizing social, ethnic, race, and gender inequalities. These inequalities prevail in Brazil as barriers to accessing and completing higher education, thus sustaining the oppression of mothers. Most collectives are based in the Brazilian southeast and southern regions. To address these challenges, they have recently established the National Collective of University Mothers, an online support network through WhatsApp. This online community currently has 253 participants and has facilitated the discussion of maternal issues nationally.

In 2022, Vanessa Suany da Silva, a master's student at the Federal University of Santa Catarina and the leader of the AMPET (Association of Researchers, Students and Workers Mothers), and Dr. Fernanda Staniscuaski, a professor at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul and the leader of the Parent in Science Movement, along with feminist political leaders and activists of maternal collectives from the five regions of Brazil, met with the Ministry of Education to establish the working group responsible for developing studies to support the future National Policy of Maternal Permanence in Brazilian Higher Education Institutions.

Final Remarks

In this article, we shared the key learnings from @mmi.ufpe, including repercussions beyond the UFPE's academic community. We aimed to share our experience by reflecting on how we have given materiality and visibility to the debate on maternal issues in Brazilian universities. Our experience with the Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project is characterized by a wide range of emotions, concerns, and dialogues that cannot be fully encapsulated within the frames of an article. Nevertheless, we have endeavoured to summarize these aspects here.

Understanding the difficulties, challenges, and motivations associated with being a mother at UFPE was the initial step towards raising awareness within the academic community and initiating a dialogue about the inclusion, retention, and progression of mothers at UFPE. The trajectory of @mmi.ufpe over the past four years has been marked by consistent progress, evidenced by the acknowledgment by students, faculty members, university staff, the rector, and policymakers of UFPE.

Our communication strategies across social media, radio, and on-campus activities successfully achieved the goal of raising awareness within the academic community and among the UFPE management team. Since 2021, we have participated in regional, national, and international events; published texts in academic proceedings, journals, and book chapters; organized mother circles; and produced an exhibition and five seasons of radio programs for the Paulo Freire radio station. As the project has progressed, we have observed an engagement, evidenced by an increase in positive comments on social media. As of 19 January 2025, our Instagram following stood at 1,357; we have an average range of between twelve hundred to seven thousand views per reel post related to the fifth season, which aired in November and December 2024.

We acknowledge, however, that it will be a long journey of research, teaching, and extension activities to transform universities into supportive and inclusive environments for mothers. We hope that our experiences-based report may help the UFPE management body and contribute to other

associations, universities, and funding agencies in developing policies for the inclusion, retention, and progress of mothers in universities. As Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogia da Autonomia (Pedagogy of Freedom)*, there is an essential relationship between teaching activity and hope. He states: “the hope that teacher and students can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy” (72). We agree with Freire that hope is an indispensable seasoning in our life experience. So, let us persist as academic mothers.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

1. This article is a translated and expanded version of three conference papers previously presented and published in Brazil (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo 2023 and 2024; Collier de Mendonça et al.). All Portuguese to English translations are done by the authors. We used the most frequent translation of the concept of “extensão universitária” from Portuguese into English, which is “university extension.”
2. Parent in Science is a group of parent scientists who work towards raising the discussion about parenthood within the universe of science in Brazil and Latin America. Their work includes academic research focussed on data collection and knowledge production concerning the impact of children on the scientific careers of women and men; the organization of the Motherhood and Science Symposium, currently in its fifth edition; and direct interaction with government science funding agencies. Further information available at: (<https://www.parentinscience.com/english>.)

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TARA CARPENTER ESTRADA, AUDREY HILLIGOSS,
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What Are We Trying to Build? Artist-Mothers in Academia on Creating Sustainable Careers

This article examines the unique challenges of motherhood in academia, advocating for distinguishing between fixed and malleable constraints while leveraging artistic thinking to develop proactive strategies for a more fulfilling academic life. From an artist's perspective, it argues that many constraints, often perceived as rigid, can be creatively reinterpreted and reshaped, empowering academic mothers to design their professional and personal experiences.

Drawing on a literature review, personal vignettes, and insights from artistic practices, the article explores how an artistic mindset can support the creative problem-solving needed to navigate intersecting identities. Much of academic life is shown to be malleable, like clay, allowing for adaptation in areas such as flexible scheduling, workload management, and household partnerships. However, certain aspects, metaphorically described as "rocks in clay," resist change, including the tenure clock, the availability of affordable childcare, and campus climate. Recognizing and understanding these fixed challenges enable informed decision-making and strategies to work around them.

The article concludes by summarizing key insights and advocating for an artistic approach to academic life that benefits not just mother academics but all scholars. Additionally, it offers institutional recommendations to enhance the adaptability of academic structures, contributing to the broader discourse on academic motherhood and providing actionable insights for supporting the success and wellbeing of mothers in academia across disciplines.

Introduction

This article explores the unique challenges of motherhood in academia to argue for distinguishing between fixed and malleable constraints and using artistic thinking to create proactive strategies for a more fulfilling academic life. Working in academia involves a complex array of overlapping and sometimes contradictory responsibilities. Much has been written about motherhood in academia, including a special issue of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* titled “Mothers in Academe” written in 2015 (volume six, issue two). This article synthesizes existing literature on academic motherhood, exploring how a creative approach to the challenges of working in academia can positively reshape the experience for mothers in the field. Through a review of current research, vignettes, and personal experiences, we examine the particular challenges faced by mother academics. From an artist’s perspective, we suggest that some constraints in academic work are more malleable than they initially seem, allowing for re-interpretation and proactive change. By distinguishing between what is fixed and what can be reimagined, mother academics can design their experiences to foster sustainability and growth as artists, academics, and mothers.

Tallest Tower as a Metaphor

It is the first day of a general education (GE) art class, and students from various majors, many with little experience in art, gather in the university classroom. Tara distributes lumps of clay, each about the size of a softball. On the whiteboard at the front of the room are the directions: “Build the tallest tower.”

Students approach the prompt differently: Some create blocks and stack them; others roll coils of clay and attempt to make them stand. Some build supports, and others build upwards, squeezing the clay into long, thin spires. A few students immediately become verbally competitive, playfully trying to outdo their peers, while others focus inwards and quietly experiment with the clay. After about fifteen minutes, Tara measures the towers with a yardstick to determine the tallest. Some are so spindly that they collapse almost immediately. But a winner is announced, followed by a round of applause. Tara then invites the students to observe each other’s work, discussing different strategies and aesthetic qualities. She asks, “What have we learned about clay?” and students share their observations from the activity. Although height is the stated challenge, Tara’s true goals are to engage students, spark creativity and curiosity, increase familiarity with the material, cultivate comfort in a new setting, and build classroom rapport.

In academia, the biggest implicit and explicit goal is achievement. Graduate students and early career academics often face pressure to “publish or perish.” For assistant professors, achieving tenure requires demonstrating excellence in areas valued by their institution, such as maintaining a robust record of scholarly research or creative practice, excelling in teaching, and making significant service contributions (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). The competition can feel fierce, leading to a sense that one’s work is “unbounded” (O’Reilly and Hallstein)—there is always more to do and never enough time to do it all. As we strive to meet these professional demands while balancing careers with family, community, and personal interests, a crucial question emerges: “What are we trying to build?” This article uses the metaphor of the “tallest tower” activity as a structure (pun intended) for creating a sustainable life as an artist, academic, and mother. It examines successes, challenges, and strategies for overcoming obstacles.

We begin with a survey of literature on academic motherhood. Then, we lean into our artist identities to explore how an artistic mindset can afford insight when applied to the creative problem of intersecting identities. We posit that much of academic life is malleable, like clay, and therefore open to creative adaptation. We explore malleable aspects, including flexible scheduling, workload management, and partnerships at home. However, we also compare some aspects of academic life to “rocks in clay” or lumpy, unworkable materials with little adaptability. Although having limited control in these areas can be frustrating, understanding these challenges can help us make more informed decisions and find ways to work around them. These unworkable aspects include the tenure clock and timing of children, availability of affordable daycare, and campus climate. The conclusion summarizes the key findings and insights and reiterates how approaching academic life with an artistic mindset can be beneficial to all academics, even those who are not in creative fields. We also present institutional recommendations that could improve the malleability of academic life for all academics.

Literature on Academic Motherhood

If the goal of the tallest tower activity is height and height alone, the best strategy is to build straight up with as little foundation as possible, pinching the clay impossibly thin at the top. This approach often wins the height competition but results in a tower that quickly topples. Students hold the tower steady until it is measured, after which it sags and collapses. An academic career modelled on this approach might prioritize the rapid accumulation of accolades—scholarly publications, conference presentations, art gallery exhibitions, grants, awards, etc.—at the expense of other aspects of life. This strategy might work for single academics with minimal family obligations or

fathers in normative relationships who “have a wife/partner at home, who will ensure that their family lives do not interfere with the normative expectations and demands of the profession” (Motapanyane and Dobson 130). However, even when the approach works, it still represents an unbalanced and, in many cases, unsustainable approach to an academic career—one valuing achievement above all else, and does not consider other responsibilities, identities, and desires.

Considerable research has examined the challenges mothers face in academia. Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro note: “The ideal of the supermom-employee-student is especially poignant in academia, where the existence of flexible schedules as well as extended winter and summer breaks creates the misinformed assumption that the demands of the academy are compatible with the demands of parenting” (2). While academia’s flexible structure holds potential to be an ideal setting for mothers with childcare responsibilities, realizing this potential is challenging. The literature presents conflicting views on whether success in academia is possible or even desirable for mothers with caregiving responsibilities. For example, in frequently cited research, Mason and Goulden found that whereas most married males with small children achieve tenure, most women with tenure are unmarried and/or do not have children. Thus, academia may not be as supportive of mothers as it first appears.

The dual demands of motherhood and academia present unique challenges for building sustainable careers. This is particularly difficult in Western cultures that impose heavy expectations on mothers, described by BettyAnn Martin as an “oppressive litany of maternal labours” (11). Paired with the often unspoken “belief that one must constantly work (even during labour, childbirth, and recovery)” in academia (Pare 56), mothers can be stretched thin when they try to match expectations in both areas. Both societal expectations around caregiving and the pressure to be perpetually engaged in their work could negatively affect women’s work-life balance and chances of tenure.

Academic expectations usually include teaching and mentoring, service to the university and the profession, and research (among others, which will be discussed later). Women, especially mothers, may feel a need to prove themselves and take on “more responsibility than required by ... job descriptions just to keep the workplace running smoothly” (Summers and Clarke 239). Researchers have found that female academics are often assigned greater teaching and mentoring responsibilities than their male counterparts (Houpalainen and Satama; Martínez and Ortíz). And when time is limited, women tend to prioritize teaching over research (Hallstein and Hayden 175; Nelson and Combe 219). Perversely, faculty who engage more heavily with teaching and service “are penalized for engaging in those areas over research”

(Nelson and Combe 219). Burdened with these additional responsibilities, which are often devalued, women may find they have less time to engage in research or creative activities.

Research and creative work are inherently difficult: they are time-consuming, indirect, and often require outside funding. It can take years from conception to publication or exhibition. In contrast, students and service tasks are ever-present and demand attention. Women are socialized to notice and address these immediate needs. As Martin notes, an “ethic of care is encouraged by cultural representations that idealize maternal devotion and is enforced by social institutions that rely heavily on the benefits of unpaid labour” (14). These factors—including external and internal demands and the challenges of maintaining research momentum amid competing priorities—can limit women’s achievement and advancement in academia.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequities. Mary Friedman and Emily Satterthwaite note that it amplified the “historic inequality posed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood” (55). During the pandemic, women’s academic productivity plummeted while men’s productivity increased (Viglione). For example, in Mexican universities, 46 per cent of academic mothers reduced professional activities by approximately three hours daily during confinement (Martínez and Ortíz 158). Societal expectations exacerbated existing inequities: Whereas fathers were celebrated for pitching in, mothers were reminded of their shortcomings (Friedman and Satterthwaite 55). The impacts of COVID-19 can still be felt today, as the mental strain of managing family and professional responsibilities during the pandemic, paired with the loss of research time, has caused some women to fall behind in their academic milestones or leave academia altogether.

Despite the setbacks of the pandemic, there have also been hopeful developments for women academics in the last several years. Before the pandemic, younger generations of female academics were beginning to match and, in some cases, even outperform their male counterparts (Dapiton et al. 1427). Furthermore, researchers offered additional perspectives on how being a mother can positively affect careers in academia. Astrid S. Huopalaainen and Suvi T. Satama consider how motherhood can be “a transformative practice” that strengthens and develops mothers in their academic professions (102). Ethelbert P. Dapiton et al.’s research explores how parenting responsibilities may also serve as a moderating factor for research productivity and work-life balance. Artist mothers can support one another: When the pandemic caused lockdowns, academic mothers like Vanessa Marr responded by creating virtual communities for collaborative research and emotional support. These developments have brought new hope that academia is gradually becoming more inclusive to mothers.

Nevertheless, many challenges remain, and as women academics, we cannot ignore the systems we are embedded in. Especially with the ticking tenure clock, we cannot simply opt out of the game. But none of us aspire to careers resembling the spindly, easily toppled clay towers built by Tara's students. We do not want to sacrifice our personal lives and relationships for academic success. We seek satisfying and interesting jobs, close and supportive relationships, and the audacity to maintain identities outside work and home. An artistic lens helps us to build a life in academia that works for us.

Academic Experience as Malleable

Artists are creative problem solvers. The apparent incompatibility of intensive mothering and high achievement in academia is a puzzle that artists have approached from many different angles. In Sandra's experience, making space for her artistic work enhances her creativity in other areas of life and, thus, becomes a necessary component of balancing academia, work, and mothering rather than an added frill. Prioritizing her art allows her to approach personal and professional challenges creatively, viewing parenting, teaching, and research as opportunities for problem-solving. This practice primes her to see all aspects of her life—whether artistic, academic, or familial—as creative challenges that can be navigated with adaptability and innovation.

Artist and professor Beth Krensky describes how her artistic mindset helps her build an academic career that works for her: "It was my ability as an artist, a creative adapter, that allowed me to reframe my ideas of success. I decided that it was important to listen to myself, extend notions of time, and create work that still addressed important ideas yet did not always have to be so time intensive" (60). By redefining success on her terms, Krensky avoids the conflict between her roles as a mother and an academic. Similarly, Fleur Summers and Angela Clarke describe how, as artists, they "explore the in-betweenness of the many roles [they] play" (235). They embrace the interconnectedness of their roles rather than separating them; this fluid approach allows them to "forge an academic career and an artistic practice as well as raise a family" (238). These artistic perspectives offer unique insights that may alleviate some of the pressures women academics face.

As artists and academics, we seek to reframe our academic experiences as something malleable—like clay—that can be shaped and reshaped to fit our evolving needs throughout our careers and family lives. This creative approach involves both adapting our expectations and intentionally designing our paths. In the following section, we explore aspects of academic work, some more adaptable than others, and how these situations might be adjusted to better suit our needs. Research supports this view, showing that success for mothers in academia often stems more from their agency and choices than from

institutional support (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 11). Our goal is not just to survive the rigours of academic life but to find “satisfaction and success in all of [our] many roles” (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 1). Reframing and reshaping our experience makes that possible.

Flexible Scheduling

One of the most malleable aspects of academia is its flexible schedule. Academics are generally free to set their hours as long as they complete their work. Except for classes and meetings, work can be performed from anywhere at any time. This flexibility is often seen as “more conducive to family time than other career options” (Pare 59), offering a sense of control over when and where work happens.

However, flexibility has a downside. The lines between work, artmaking, and home can blur, complicating our understanding of what it means to successfully fulfill these demands as we navigate them (Saggese 6). Disconnecting from work when working from home can be especially difficult (Pare) because there is no distinct separation between work and personal life. And even when away from home, the ability to work anytime, anywhere, can lead to working all the time, everywhere. Audrey, for example, had to downgrade to a flip phone to resist the urge to check emails while commuting.

Academics often find that despite their flexible schedules, they lack the time they want to devote to scholarship, family, and themselves (Kuhl et al. 21). The same flexibility that feels like a benefit when a mother can be available for her children during the day feels like a burden when she is “up at 10:00 p.m. grading” (Carpenter Estrada 34). Furthermore, the blurred boundaries between work and home can increase the likelihood of work-family conflict (Wyatt-Nichol et al. 108). These challenges contrast with the type of fluidity and interconnectedness of work and home that Summers and Clarke advocate for. Fluidity between roles can allow academics to flow purposely between chosen priorities, but lack of boundaries leads to work taking over at the expense of everything else.

As authors, we frequently face the challenge of using flexibility well. At times, we have had to establish stronger boundaries around our work to protect our time. Other times, we have embraced late-night and early-morning work sessions as a conscious choice. For instance, while off contract during summer and winter break, with limited affordable childcare options, we worked on this paper during odd hours—early mornings, nap times, and late at night while our children slept. This choice of working times allows us more quality time with our families during the day.

Academic women often use their flexibility strategically to minimize friction between work and family life, such as working through lunch or starting later

to accommodate children's schedules (Walker 314). While these strategies can help in the short term, they can also lead to exhaustion, with little time for breaks and rest over the long term. Additionally, working outside traditional hours can leave mothers in academia feeling disconnected from colleagues, for example, missing out on informal interactions throughout the day. It is possible to feel grateful for the flexibility while feeling overwhelmed and isolated. Audrey shares her experience:

I've been able to do a lot of work from home. I can attend faculty meetings on Zoom. I can hold office hours online. Some of my classes are online. I also control my schedule, scheduling my classes after my husband gets off his 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. job, so we might not need daycare. This has made breastfeeding very easy. It allows me to be home with my son Silas a lot, and I can work those odd hours, allowing me to spend a lot of time with him. However, working from home with a child isn't very productive and oftentimes only happens when he is sleeping or if my parents come to visit and watch him. And I often feel spread thin.

We have found that an artistic mindset helps us be more adaptable and creative in managing and scheduling our academic, artistic, and family priorities. Much like how we approach artmaking—where flexibility and experimentation are key—we have learned to weave our creative practices into our academic and personal lives. For example, we do creative work alongside our students to model being artists and teachers, and we create at home with and around our children to show them the importance of our artistic practice. Bringing our identities and their strengths to bear helps us address perceived institutional barriers (Hawkes et al. 236). Like artist and scholar Jorge Lucero, we see ourselves as “artists-in-residence” in our classrooms and homes. We “find unity between [our] different roles and responsibilities [by viewing] them all as part of [our] artistic practice” (Carpenter Estrada 39). Our output may not always be our “best” or “ideal” work, but this approach allows us to continue to create, especially when life's demands are at their highest.

However, we must be cautious not to let our work, even the work we are passionate about, consume all of our time and energy. We also need space and time in our schedules to be human and rest. Recognizing these needs requires a shift in how we view the demands of academia and motherhood. While the institutional expectation of being an “ideal worker” (O'Reilly and Hallstein 12) clashes with the cultural expectation of intensive mothering, which assumes “childcare work and domestic management [to be] solely a mother's responsibility” (Martin 11), part of approaching scheduling with an artist mindset involves recognizing these relentless expectations of work and mothering as unachievable and undesirable. We can use the malleable flexibility of

the academic profession to choose how we respond to cultural expectations—whether by meeting them, adjusting them, or defying them altogether in ways that better align with our values.

Workload Management

Mothers in academia often find it essential to “become more efficient and organized to get their work done” (Craft and Maseberg-Tomlinson 71). Balancing childrearing responsibilities forces mothers to clarify priorities and challenge prechild ideal worker norms (Chesser 33). As a result, many report improved time management and focus (Chesser 33). This shift, however, is about increased efficiency and reshaping how we approach and engage with academic work. An artistic mindset emphasizing process over product, intuition, and adaptability can offer a unique lens to navigate the inherent tensions of balancing diverse professional and personal workloads.

One challenge in prioritizing academic work is its multifaceted nature. Just as artists balance multiple projects and mediums, professors not only teach but also advise students, conduct research, present at conferences, serve on committees, and manage administrative duties. These tasks are all neverending and demand different, “often conflicting, skills and scheduling” (O’Reilly and Hallstein 20). Graduate students face similar demands, often juggling teaching, coursework, research, and thesis writing, with some, like Sandra, also balancing full-time jobs. Artist academics face an additional layer of complexity—engaging in creative work can include maintaining a digital presence and organizing gallery shows.

The concept of “satisficing,” coined by Herbert A. Simon in 1981, offers a philosophical perspective to scale back expectations and to make these demands more manageable. Satisficing is when a person makes decisions that are “good enough” (though not necessarily optimal) given the context of time, resources, and other constraints (Simon 35). For mother academics, satisficing can be a necessary strategy to ensure that they meet their responsibilities without overextending themselves. The artist’s mindset offers a helpful parallel: As artist Melissa Madonni Haims wisely notes, “Perfection is unachievable. Perfection is the enemy” (303). Just as artists embrace the inherent imperfections of their work, mother academics can accept the reality that “good enough” is the most sustainable and effective long-term approach.

Tara’s career illustrates this shift in mindset. Early on, she would extensively rework classes each semester, adding and changing content to optimize the student experience. After her youngest child was born, this approach became unsustainable. Although she updates courses when necessary, she has reduced her workload by keeping most courses consistent. She was surprised that this more minimal approach to class setup did not negatively affect student

outcomes and realized she had been doing more work than necessary.

Collaboration with colleagues has also become an important part of our process. We have found that collaboration with like-minded mother artists in academia can provide a place to tune and harmonize our research skills to discover new ways of managing the “tension between the need for time, art-making, and the time-intensive need of children” (Jackson 167). Furthermore, we share resources, lesson plans, and grading strategies with all of our colleagues to lighten our collective load. Collaboration makes our work better and less time intensive.

Streamlining grading further reduces workload and, as a bonus, is often appreciated by students. We critically assess courses to eliminate nonessential assignments and simplify grading. We consider which assignments require personalized feedback, which can be scored by teaching assistants or self-assessed, and which could be graded based on participation or completion. These changes make our teaching loads throughout the semester more manageable. These proactive approaches mirror how an artist might approach their studio practice—periodically assessing their creative goals and making intentional choices about what to prioritize and what to scale back or set aside for another time.

However, we have less control over some academic work, such as committee assignments and administrative duties, because chairs and deans assign it. Clear communication with leadership can help us balance these responsibilities. We have learned to ask if requests for participation are mandatory or optional and to request a reevaluation of current duties when new ones are assigned, such as asking, “Can I remove something from my current load to accommodate this new task?” These conversations can be risky, especially before tenure, as service is an evaluation area for promotion.

Audrey recalls being told by her chair to expect more than seventy hours of work a week when she was first hired. Because of these expectations, asking to lighten the load in any way can make one feel like a “slacker” and put one at risk of being seen as less competent or dedicated. Diplomacy is essential, as our chairs, deans, and colleagues—whose votes can influence tenure decisions—can make this aspect of our work more or less malleable. Intentionally developing relationships with leadership over time can help make these conversations less risky and help academics to understand what conversations will not be productive.

Tara’s department shows another creative approach to building sustainable careers: Her teaching area colleagues recently came together with support from their chair to collectively and critically examine the ongoing administrative and committee work. They eliminated unnecessary service and quantified the time for each task to divide the workload. This effort helped make visible all the work taking place in the background and supported

everyone in understanding the ins and outs of the area. By fostering transparency, this process addressed quiet expansions of responsibilities over time, ensuring that each individual's workload was manageable and aligned with their broader goals.

Partnership at Home

Although this article focuses mostly on professional challenges and adaptations, personal relationships, particularly with life partners, play a crucial role in determining academic success (Jacobs and Gerson; Philippsen). Andrea O'Reilly emphasizes that this often-overlooked dynamic is essential to combining an academic career with motherhood (442). O'Reilly and Lynn O'Brien Hallstein assert that gender equity "in the home is more often a determinant of employment success than family-friendly policies in the workplace" (12). Like artmaking, relationship-building requires ongoing negotiation, adaptation, and creative problem-solving.

It is important to note that not all mothers in academia have partners. For example, Tara was a single mother through graduate school and the first six years of being a professor. O'Reilly's research shows that single mothers tend to fare better in academia than partnered parents in normative relationships. She points out that because single mothers have sole financial responsibility for their families, "opting out is simply less of an option" (O'Reilly 449). This was certainly true for Tara, who, despite the hardships, felt a deep sense of commitment to her job and the stability it provided for her and her child.

For partnered parents, relationships and home structures are crucial. In *The Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung discuss how working women often face a "second shift" at home, managing household tasks and childrearing. This imbalance is perpetuated by cultural conditioning, which holds that women are primarily responsible for domestic duties. Karen Christopher and Avery Kolers, coparents and academics, note that when "we consciously aim to resist gendered practices in child rearing, decades of traditional socialization work against most of us" (306). Although Hochschild penned *The Second Shift* in 1989, women today still experience pressure to take on most of the household responsibilities and are often judged for spending time differently (Rodskey 77). This challenge is not simply logistical but emotional and psychological as women push up against societal expectations.

Sandra, for instance, has faced criticism for returning to graduate school and continuing to work while raising children. She has been asked, "How are you going to do all that and be a mom and partner?" and "Don't you feel bad you are leaving your children so much while you're in classes?" Even her mother commented, "I'm worried that you are neglecting your two youngest children with all your activities and interests." These societal expectations and

family dynamics can hinder academic mothers' ability to advance in academia. Sandra writes about her own experience:

When I started graduate school, my husband took over grocery shopping, meal planning, and cooking because meal preparation was one of the household chores that stressed me out the most. I felt as though I had to hide that information from friends and family because I expected criticism. When some people found out, the response was usually like I won a prize in a husband. The fact that I still carried a huge portion of the household chores was ignored.

The “second shift” is a recipe for burnout. Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel point out that not only does it impact the time women have for work, but it also “creates a divided set of loyalties that men often do not encounter to the same extent” (6). Even in two-parent families, women typically report more time spent on these tasks, while men enjoy more leisure time (Marsh 151). Concerning her relationship, Audrey reflects that when her husband takes on more household tasks and childcare responsibilities, it makes things run more smoothly. However, she still sometimes feels she is doing two full-time jobs—mom and professor—at once: “I run myself ragged and feel like a big failure at both.”

We have learned from our experiences that partnerships rooted in equality, mutual respect, and an understanding of one another's professional pursuits—whether in academia, the arts, or elsewhere—are crucial to sustaining long-term success. Tara has experienced partnership in both traditional and egalitarian structures. Her first marriage adhered to conventional gender roles, while her current one mirrors historian Jodi Vandenburg-Daves's description of successful women who make it to full professor: “[they] seem to share a common characteristic: husbands who stay at home for part of the child-rearing years, work part-time, or at the very least are not in jobs that require a great deal of travel” (qtd. In O'Reilly and Hallstein 38). Though not yet a full professor, Tara credits her success to the unconventional structure she shares with her husband, who works part-time, with both of them alternating days to trade off responsibilities at home.

Even with supportive partners, ongoing conversations are essential to maintaining equality in the relationship. When couples do not intentionally and regularly discuss how to divide household responsibilities, the default often falls into the traditional pattern: One partner focusses on full-time paid work, while the other—usually the mother—takes on all the unpaid labour, sometimes in addition to paid work (Carpenter Estrada et al. 333). Partners, if both are willing, can avoid this pitfall by collaborating to create the kinds of structures supporting both equally in achieving their goals.

Relationships are inherently malleable; people grow and change over time, so relationships must grow and change. Arts writer Hettie Judah poignantly calls for cultural change around shared parenthood, asking, “Wouldn’t it be glorious if ... artists [and we might add academics] didn’t feel pressured to choose between motherhood and a successful career? ... If family was not considered a trap for women, because childcare was equally shared between partners?” (12). This vision of shared responsibility and mutual adaptation highlights the potential for relationships to evolve into partnerships that nurture personal and professional growth.

Rocks in the Clay: Things That Are Out of Our Control in Academia

While many aspects of academic work—much like the creative process—are malleable and open to individual adaptations, some elements remain stubbornly fixed, beyond our control. These aspects are like rocks in clay: rigid, unyielding, and often hindering our ability to build what we envision. Just as an artist must navigate the limitations of their materials, we must contend with constraints, such as the tenure clock and fertility, campus climate and culture, and the availability of daycare. These constraints shape what we can create in our academic careers and personal lives.

Understanding situational constraints can help academic mothers acknowledge the limits of their control, allowing them to manage expectations better, prioritize what is most important, and focus their energy on areas where they can create a meaningful impact rather than expend it on unchangeable factors. By recognizing fixed elements, academic mothers can develop more realistic strategies for balancing their multifaceted roles.

Tenure Clock and Timing of Children

The timeline to earn advanced degrees and secure tenure often coincides with a woman’s peak fertility years. Researchers Ward and Wolf-Wendel state: “For many academic women, the tenure and biological clocks tick simultaneously” and can even work against each other, as stress can interfere with a woman’s ability to get pregnant (7). The tenure process typically lasts six to seven years, with faculty reviewed at the end and either achieving tenure or being let go. The math is not on women’s side, as fertility dips in the mid-thirties and early forties. Tara was surprised to learn that her pregnancy at the age of thirty-seven classified her as a “geriatric pregnancy” with higher risks. Therefore, if women want to bear children and pursue academic careers, timing becomes an important concern.

Women are often told that mothers can only succeed in academia if they “sequence [their] reproduction to coincide with ambition” (Martin 11) and are advised to delay childbirth. Consequently, the majority of women “who

achieve tenure indicate that they had fewer children than they would have liked” (O’Gorman 180). Another option is to wait until after birthing and raising children to attain advanced degrees and start work in academia. Like many women, Sandra waited until her children were all in school before attending graduate school. However, this choice has led to pushback, with people asking her if it is “worth it” to pursue her master’s at her age—an ageist perspective that discounts her life experiences and their value to her academic work.

Moreover, women in academia are frequently encouraged to time their births around the academic calendar, with August, December, or summer births being ideal. Audrey had her child in December, as she says, “timed perfectly,” allowing her to take leave during the spring semester and take advantage of her summer off. But this was a lucky coincidence: Fertility does not always align with plans. Collectively, Tara, Audrey, and Sandra have experienced four miscarriages and difficulties in conceiving. For academic women who wish to become mothers, precise timing is not always an option. These constraints highlight the challenges of balancing professional and personal goals and how deeply academia intersects with—and often dictates—family planning, making these pressures feel invasive.

Like other creative processes, conception can feel particularly chaotic and at odds with rigid timelines. Many artists have approached the chaos and uncertainty of parenthood by embracing it in their art. Artist Caitlin Connolly’s project *COLLABWITHCHAOS* offers an insightful example of working with unpredictability, as she used her young twin toddlers’ scribbles as starting points for her drawings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In her website’s artist statement, Connolly reflects that artists can “revel in [their] ability to dance with what is not yet known, seen, organized, or understood.” Similarly, artist, mother, and academic Meaghan Brady Nelson paints collaboratively with her child, working on large canvases together and passing smaller works back and forth. She finds that the unpredictability and freedom in her child’s painting process “helped me rediscover my own interest in making art” (Nelson and Combe 223). Deciding to have a child while working in academia can feel like a collaboration with chaos. Just as Connolly and Nelson trust their work is enriched by the intervention of their children, academic mothers can trust that their lives and careers will be shaped in meaningful ways by their children, regardless of when they decide to have them and how forthcoming they are in arriving.

Availability of Affordable Daycare

When children arrive, access to affordable daycare becomes a critical concern for mothers in academia. Sandra knows this intimately because when her children were younger, she ran her preschool, which provided extended options for working parents. When Tara was in graduate school, her institution provided on-campus daycare, which allowed her to balance classes and childcare. This support was vital, especially as a single parent without any family nearby.

However, daycare remains a significant expense and logistical burden for academic mothers with young children. Tara's current institution lacks on-site daycare, and Audrey's institution closed its daycare during the COVID-19 pandemic. When Audrey asked her university's chief wellbeing officer about the daycare reopening, he said he would check into it, and then when contacted again, he was unresponsive to her emails. Her chair suggested pursuing the issue through the university's faculty senate, but Audrey did not feel she had the time to pursue uncertain systemic support that would probably not take effect before her son went to preschool (Martin 19). However, Audrey would like to pursue this once she is tenured and can afford to invest the time and attention to support other academic mothers.

Despite the clear need for such services, universities have generally been reluctant to allocate significant resources to daycare, even though it is essential for the successful participation of academic mothers in their professional roles. As Kristin Marsh observes, "They understand you need pens and paper to do your job. They don't care that you need childcare to do your job" (145). In Marsh's study of nineteen women in academia, none reported having access to on-site daycare or support for off-site daycare (145). Consequently, many academic mothers are compelled to seek and research alternative childcare arrangements, adding another layer of complexity to the already challenging task of balancing professional and personal responsibilities. Some mothers imaginatively find and rely on informal networks, such as childcare exchanges with other parents, whereas others attempt to negotiate flexible work hours or adjust their schedules to accommodate childcare needs. These strategies, though necessary, require constant adaptation and creative problem-solving.

Campus Climate and Culture

Family-friendly policies and an environment that encourages utilizing them might be the difference necessary for a mother to achieve tenure. However, even when family-friendly policies exist, they are often difficult to access. Policies may be unknown or underutilized, requiring mothers to seek out resources (Vancour 167). Additionally, some women hesitate to use these policies, fearing they will be seen as "weak" or that their colleagues will need to "take up the slack," for example, during their maternity leave (Marsh 141).

Ward and Wolf-Wendel argue that higher education must implement policies and foster environments where these policies can be utilized without fear of negative repercussions (12). When mothers choose to take maternity leave, it empowers the mother and colleagues who may feel hesitant to use such resources.

Academic mothers can also request creative adjustments to existing policies. For example, rather than taking the one-semester maternity leave offered by her institution, Tara talked with her chair and negotiated a lighter course load spread over an entire year. This arrangement benefited her department by allowing her to cover essential courses that would have been difficult to staff and helped her family by enabling a smoother transition to life with a new child.

Marsh notes that the experience of “academic mothers is often really shaped by an individual administrator or chair, or by supportive colleagues” (146). As discussed earlier, department chairs and other leadership can significantly affect the work-life balance of mothers in academia, with attitudes ranging from bias against to support for caregiving (Eversole et al. 74). Researcher and academic Kim Powell emphasizes that “unless female faculty members who are mothers have strong advocates in positions of power who value working parents, they are particularly in danger of not reaching the rank of tenured professor because their very presence challenges the status quo” (50).

Given these constraints, it becomes crucial for academic mothers to be intentional in cultivating relationships with leaders within their departments, whether through mentorship or direct communication. In addition, side-by-side mentorship with peers can also be invaluable. Identifying other academic mothers and seeking opportunities for collaboration or guidance can provide essential support.

Conclusion

This article analyzes the parts of our academic careers that are malleable and those that are fixed, highlighting both the challenges and possibilities we encounter as academic mothers. We recognize the significant challenges we face (Martin 13) and the stress that academic mothers endure (Eversole et al. 72). However, we aim to move beyond a narrative of struggle to give space for joy and create action towards a more just and forward-thinking future. The tensions between professional demands and caregiving responsibilities are real, but we choose to focus on the aspects of our jobs that we can control, approaching these challenges with an artistic mindset to design more fulfilling and manageable careers. Rather than striving to meet idealized standards, we can focus on what can be accomplished despite these inevitable constraints. Rebecca Woodhouse asserts,

When we listen to our own needs and desires and to those of our families, we manage our time and space as necessary. The equilibrium is personal and unique, but the common factor is that nobody has perfectly balanced days to live happily ever after. Balanced days come and go, but we find the equilibrium in the weeks, months and years we need to work and to care for our children. We can assess our goals, make our art, get gallery shows, and (gasp!) love our children enough to remember to feed them. Word has it, our children even benefit from watching us prioritize our needs and theirs. (309)

As artists, we know balance is not always accomplished through symmetry or rigid structures, placing things evenly or applying idealized standards. Disparate parts working together also produce symmetry. In art and life, balance is not a static state but an ongoing process of negotiation, adjustment, and acceptance of complexity.

Our efforts to create balance do not absolve institutions of their responsibility to support working parents. As Virginia L. Lewis asserts, “Acceptance [of mothers in academia] is wonderful, yet it is really a bare minimum” (62). Institutions can recognize that supporting family life is not a personal or private issue but a public and social one, essential to fostering a thriving academic environment. A broader cultural shift is needed—one that views caregiving and family as complementary to academic careers rather than obstacles.

Recommendations for Institutional Change

Systemic changes can address the structural barriers that currently hinder mothers in academia. Implementing policies and practices supporting caregivers and promoting work-life integration can foster an environment where academic mothers (and all academics who desire better work-life balance) can thrive. There are several ways universities can lead a shift towards a more equitable workplace by creatively reimagining structures to support academic parents. These include more adaptable work schedules, support for workload management, greater options for tenure clocks, support for childcare, and improvements to campus culture.

More adaptable schedules benefit everyone. Since the pandemic, Tara and Audrey have observed a significant increase in students preferring online meetings over in-person ones. Virtual meetings save students commuting time, resolve parking challenges, and allow seamless transitions between academic work and other responsibilities. For students who are also mothers, online meetings reduce or eliminate the need for daycare arrangements. To address the needs of these students and faculty, institutions could expand opportunities for remote work. They could offer options, where feasible, to teach classes online or in hybrid formats. Much committee work can also be

conducted virtually rather than in person. Where working online is not an option—as in hands-on studio art classes or other lab courses—departments can schedule with faculty needs in mind. Every year, Tara’s department sends out a survey that asks faculty their preferences for teaching times and whether they want to condense all classes to two days or spread them across the week. This practice helps the department to adapt work schedules to faculty needs. It also acknowledges that these needs change over time.

To assist with workload management, universities, colleges, and departments can critically assess faculty expectations. Leadership can explore options for reducing or redistributing service work to ensure more equitable distribution. When possible, staff and student employees can be engaged to support administrative and advisory tasks. Professional development opportunities can focus on streamlining grading procedures and other time-saving strategies. In tenure deliberations, placing a higher value on teaching and service—at least equal to that of research and scholarship—would prevent women, who are often assigned more of these responsibilities and tend to place greater emphasis on their work in these areas (Hallstein and Hayden 175; Houpalainen and Satama; Martínez and Ortíz; Nelson and Combe 219), from being disadvantaged. Tenure policies that support and value collaborative research also help alleviate the pressure on individual researchers by distributing responsibilities across a team, leading to more manageable workloads. These policies would recognize the collective nature of many academic endeavours, fostering a more sustainable approach to career development.

Universities can give academic mothers options to pause the tenure clock, although the postponement of the accompanying salary raise and professional security is not ideal. More flexible tenure policies can help alleviate the pressure to time childbearing around academic career milestones, allowing women to make decisions about family and career that align with their unique circumstances. Institutions can also grant faculty the option to shift to part-time work during times of greater personal needs (whether caring for children, parents, or partners) without losing their place on the tenure track.

Access to affordable and reliable childcare, particularly on campus, significantly reduces logistical challenges and supports all academic parents—mothers and fathers alike—as well as students with children in balancing their professional and caregiving responsibilities. If on-campus childcare is not possible, universities can support faculty in connecting with nearby childcare facilities. Institutions can also facilitate the creation of informal childcare exchange networks among faculty and staff to help meet this critical need.

Universities can actively foster a campus culture that supports academic mothers. This includes providing adequate nursing spaces and safe areas where children can play while parents study or work. Whenever appropriate, children

can be welcomed into classes and meetings. Family-friendly policies are another essential aspect of campus culture. Generous, accessible, and adaptable maternity and paternity leave policies should be well-publicized, empowering academic mothers to utilize them without fear of career repercussions.

Finally, universities can promote work-life balance by offering leadership training for department chairs and administrators on the unique challenges faced by academic mothers and other caregivers. Encouraging transparency, open dialogue, and peer mentoring—especially among parents—can help build a supportive community where caregiving is valued as an integral part of academic life. Institutions can also create mentorship programs specifically designed to help academic parents balance personal and professional responsibilities while fostering the confidence to set boundaries when needed.

All these changes would not only benefit academic mothers, but would foster a more inclusive, equitable academic environment where all faculty members—regardless of caregiving responsibilities—can flourish. By leading these systemic changes, universities can redefine what it means to support academic careers, viewing faculty as holistic individuals with rich personal lives outside their professional roles.

So What Are We Trying to Build?

In academia, men often describe the pursuit of tenure as a “game” to be won, while women view it as a “balancing act,” involving personal sacrifices for career success (Gunter and Stambach). For us, academia is not a game but a challenge to build fulfilling lives that integrate career and family. Reflecting on these metaphors, we question whether the “tallest tower” mentality is truly in anyone’s best interest.

What if universities focussed less on competition and more on the holistic development of faculty and students? What if academic mothers were valued as assets rather than penalized for having children? What if fulfilling careers and meaningful relationships stood along high-quality scholarship as important goals of academia? Shifting towards this mindset would transform institutions, ensuring greater representation of women in graduate programs and tenured positions. This shift would benefit everyone in academia, leading to a more inclusive and equitable community.

Ultimately, we return to the question posed at the beginning: What are we trying to build? Our work is not about creating a tall, spindly tower but about constructing stable, sustainable lives that integrate professional success with personal fulfillment. By applying the creative problem-solving skills honed through our artistic practices, we aim to build careers that succeed in academia and thrive in the beautiful complexity of motherhood.

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Mother Is a Gendered Verb: Embodied Acts of Care in Memoirs of Queer Family

*This article rethinks the particularity of the term “mother” within the converging contexts of the recent push towards trans-inclusive language, such as “birthing person,” as well as the crisis of caregiving that came to the fore within the coronavirus pandemic. To do so, this article analyzes Krys Malcolm Bell’s recent book *The Natural Mother of the Child* (2021), which was published amid discussion in mainstream media of inclusive terminology for birth and nursing. Bell’s book uses his own experience of gestational parenthood to offer a corrective and counternarrative to essentialist notions of motherhood that operate both in cultural discussions of pregnancy and in legal documents, including birth certificates. Juxtaposed with this analysis of Bell, this article considers the equally problematic ungendering of the term “mother,” a move that fails to consider the specific embodied and intersectional contexts in which carework occurs. Ultimately, it is within mother memoirs by queer writers that we can understand ways that individual parents understand and narrate their experiences of essential labour; telling stories of queer families, in all their book-length complexity, helps write new family stories, ones that will hopefully lead to real and lasting social change.*

Care

verbs our hours into shards, when our nearest
kin are on our laps yet still farther
than our dreams to write,
to discover, to teach
to parent, to mother, to father
to verb ourselves back together.
—Divya Victor, “Care Is a Verb”

I have been actively (single) mothering for more than twenty years, from the first moments of infancy through the second year of university. I have verbed my kids: breastfed them, cooked for them, bathed them, changed them, rocked them to sleep. I wore each of them strapped to my body for more hours than I can count. I pushed them for miles in the stroller to get them to sleep, took them to the doctors' offices, drove them here there and everywhere, did loads upon loads of laundry, and wiped vomit from the floor, the bed, and the car seat. I talked with them about problems, big and small. I helped them with math homework, drafting emails, and applying to college. I tried (unsuccessfully) to throw them baseballs to hit and played four square during a pandemic. I bought them things they needed and gifts they wanted. We baked bread, cookies, and cakes and played our version of *Chopped*. A mother is so many things. Mother was who I was and what I did, noun and verb simultaneously.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells me that a “mother” is “The female parent of a human being; a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth; (also, in extended use) a woman who undertakes the responsibilities of a parent towards a child, *esp.* a stepmother.” It is also a verb: “To be or become the mother of, give birth to; (chiefly *figurative*) to be the source or originator of, give rise to, produce.” Or: “To bring up, take care of, or protect as a mother; to look after in a (sometimes excessively) kindly and protective way.”

When I say “mother,” I think I mean someone who is AFAB (assigned female at birth) who has been pregnant and given birth and/or someone who identifies as a mother and cares for a child whether or not she gave birth to that child.

It’s all slippery.

Mostly, I mean a caregiver who is not afforded the privileges of a father under patriarchy.

My rethinking of the particularity of the term “mother” occurs within the converging contexts of the recent push towards trans-inclusive language, such as “birthing person,” as well as the crisis of caregiving that came to the fore within the coronavirus pandemic. I find myself struggling for language that is inclusive of the experiences of transmasculine gestational parents without also eliding the specificity of the term “mother” within the broader umbrella of purportedly gender-neutral “parenting.” If, as trans activists such as Lara Karaian have made clear, it is critical to “unsex” pregnancy, it is equally vital not to ungender the actual work of mothering. The push to do so, in fact, stems from anti-maternal misogyny.

Written during the early days of the pandemic, Angela Garbes’s book *Essential Labor* makes an important argument about the centrality and value

of carework, which, she notes, is un- or underpaid and often undertaken by women of colour. The introductory chapter makes it clear that caregiving (also termed “essential labour”) is not essentially women’s work but can be undertaken by persons of all genders and sexes, and I do not disagree. Yet there is a telling slipperiness in Garbes’s language. She does not say that carework can be done by all but instead: “My perspective has grown to consider the work of raising children as *mothering*, an action that includes people of all genders and nonparents alike” (9). Drawing on the work of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai’a Williams, Garbes continues, “Rather than viewing care work as characteristic of the noun ‘motherhood,’ I now see it as the action of *mothering*, which includes anyone who is engaged in ‘the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life’” (9). On the surface, this is an inclusive, well-intentioned argument. But in this expansive redefinition, both rhetorically and politically, Garbes has taken the mother out of mothering.

As the coronavirus pandemic made abundantly clear, the work of caregiving is not gender neutral or disembodied, and mothers (whether cis- or transgender) do not have the same experiences or privileges as cisgender fathers. As Andrea O’Reilly unpacks in her groundbreaking book *Matricentric Feminism*, the beneficiaries of second-wave feminism do not include mothers for whom there remains a solid “maternal wall” (2). In general, working mothers earn less money than nonmothers in their chosen fields. As O’Reilly notes, “The pay gap between mothers and nonmothers under thirty-five is larger than the wage gap between young men and women” (2). To put a sharper point on it, in academic contexts specifically, male faculty benefit from being fathers, while women are penalized for being mothers on tenure track (Mason and Goulden). These findings only begin to suggest the ways that mothers—not parents—continue to be treated inequitably.

To explore the specificity of the term “mother” in this essay, I want to concentrate on Krys Malcolm Belc’s recent book *The Natural Mother of the Child* (2021), published amid discussion in mainstream media of inclusive terminology for birth and nursing. Belc’s book is a stunning memoir in essays that uses his own experience of gestational parenthood to offer a corrective and counternarrative to essentialist notions of motherhood that operate both in cultural discussions of pregnancy and in legal documents, including birth certificates. As such, the memoir provides a vital point of entry into a conversation about the limits of language and normative heteronarratives of family. As the book lays bare, the problem of language that Belc and other transmasculine gestational parents experience is that they identify as men and fathers while they are often biologically and genetically understood to be mothers. One of those experiences is elided/erased on legal documents and in

mainstream culture. There is a lack of adequate language to hold both those experiences simultaneously because of the deeply held binaristic cultural norms of parenting as well as essentialist/pronatalist logic. Mainstream understanding of parenting roles predates reproductive technologies that allow for more complicated understandings of family building and gender. And that inadequacy of language has undeniable practical consequences, including medical care and parental rights. As a corrective and counternarrative, Belc's memoir offers a complex, multifaceted look into gender and parenting from the vantage point of identity, family experience, legal documents, and medical care. As such, the memoir makes clear that the binary terms "mother" and "father" are wholly inadequate and suggests the value of reading contemporary memoirs to understand the complexity of modern families.

Belc's memoir takes the shape of a brief preamble and six longer linked essays. The first long essay, "The Machine," discusses Belc's pregnancy with Samson leading up to his birth. The piece foregrounds Belc's gender identity and the embodied experience of pregnancy, situating gestation as a central experience in Belc's transition. Among other subjects, "The Machine" considers Belc's history of gender dysphoria and eating disorders, as well as discomfort at the surveillance of fertility and pregnancy care, linked to a series of ultrasounds. Following this line of thought, the essay elucidates the difference between Belc's feelings about his pregnancy in three contexts: alone, with Anna (his cisgender partner), and out in public. Similar to earlier butch and nonbinary pregnancy memoirs—including Cherríe Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings* (1997), Karleen Pendleton Jimenez's *How to Get a Girl Pregnant* (2011), and A.K. Summers's *Pregnant Butch* (2014), as well as Thomas Beatie's *Labor of Love* (2008)—Belc's feelings about his pregnancy were highly fraught. Despite the prevalence of queer families today, Belc confronts the assumption that only cisgender women experience pregnancy. Remarking on the difference between his feelings alone and out in public, Belc remarks: "Queer people had children, but I almost never saw pregnant people like me. Alone at night, I sometimes placed my hands against the baby inside me and felt at peace, like we were in this together, and yet whenever I was outside the house I was aware of the publicness of my body, the unexpectedness" (25).

Not surprisingly, Samson's birth marks a significant turning point in Belc's transition, which reaches a pinnacle during his postpartum experience. Being pregnant with Samson, Belc explains, "forever changed my body and my understanding of who I am" (257). Beyond his own identification and gender dysphoria, Samson's birth marks a critical moment for Belc in terms of navigating legal and social systems. He writes, "I lay in bed at the birth center. Wrote my name next to *Mother* on his birth certificate. The only approximate space" (111). This moment of claiming himself "mother" is fraught: Despite his discomfort with the term, it legally codifies the real embodied connection

that Belc has to his son, both through DNA and gestation. Marking the space “father” on a birth certificate, while socially appropriate, would elide their gestational connection, one that is not only factual but also highly meaningful for Belc. He remarks, “Samson was made inside me, from part of me, and in many ways the person I am now is made from him, too” (258).

It is thus within the legal system of birth certificates and adoption proceedings that Belc most struggles with existing terminology: “My relationship with Samson could be natural without my having to stand up in court and say I was a mother” (217). We do not have language to express this embodied connection to fatherhood. In transitioning and giving up the term “mother,” Belc explains, “There are things one gains by transitioning and the things one loses ... the assumption of biological connection” (224). Yet while the “naturalness” of their relationship occurs through Belc’s genetic as well as gestational connection to Samson, this intimacy undoubtedly complicates Belc’s relation to his nongenetic and non-gestational offspring, who were carried by his partner Anna and whom he needs to adopt. Is he a different father to the child with whom he shares that natural connection? Although Belc’s memoir testifies to the importance of gender-neutral language in discussing embodied reproductive experiences, it also makes clear that embodiment matters.

Overall, Belc’s memoir beautifully unpacks the complexity of identifying as a man yet also experiencing what would in a cisgender person be described as maternal desire, the desire not only to parent and raise a family but to gestate and chestfeed. In complicating the cultural linkage of the embodied experiences of pregnancy and cisgender femininity, Belc undoes essentialist logic surrounding reproduction. As Belc puts it later in the book, “Nothing about being pregnant made me feel feminine. This body is what it is, not quite man, not quite woman, but with the parts to create and sustain life. To expel and care for that life” (192). Deliberately using the term “gestational parent,” Belc writes, “I had never embraced or used the term *mother*... It made me rage” (217). Yet even after his transition, Belc confesses, “I think about having another baby all the time” (270) and “I like pictures of me pregnant” (271).

At key moments in the memoir, Belc presents his pregnancy as a major turning point in his transition, as his understanding of gender solidified during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Belc observes, looking at family photos, “I don’t remember anything about the baby in the pictures, only the self, who I was then, just trying to make it through another day in the absolutely wrong postpartum body” (196). Outwardly, Belc transitions from a gestational parent (“natural mother” on the birth certificate) to a social father, whose marriage to a cisgender woman allows him to pass as straight in certain contexts and thus renders him invisible as trans in the social sphere. Belc

poignantly states, “This baby helped me know the person I had to become. Now no one ever thinks I’ve carried a baby” (39).

In contrast to the inadequacy of legal documents, such as Samson’s birth certificate and second parent adoption forms, Belc writes a memoir that explores the different facets of queer family building, including his role as a nongenetic but social father to Sean and ZZ and his role as a genetic and gestational parent for Samson, whom he actively fathers. Belc also reflects on the elision of the genetic connection all the children have to the sperm donor, who is a family friend. In Belc’s discussion, the experience of pregnancy and the experience of parenting are distinct in their relation to gender. Belc is not just a parent to Samson but, significantly in their social relationship, a father. Although his ultrasound photos, reprinted in the book, use his natal name, Krystyn, later documentation from his psychologist serves to represent Belc’s legal transition to Krys Malcolm.

Despite Belc’s discomfort with the term “natural mother,” coming to fatherhood is equally complicated. Situating his fatherhood alongside his family history, Belc suggests that fatherhood is deeply entwined with anger. In eschewing “mother” for “father,” Belc’s initial understanding of fatherhood ironically hinges on traditional notions of gendered parenting. “The first time I thought of myself as a dad,” Belc writes, “I was in the checkout at SuperOne” (112). Thirty years old, he wrangled three children through the grocery store where the cashier described him as “The Awesome Dad.” In this social context, Belc’s performance of parenting is noted as exemplary. This moment opens into a discussion of men and violence, including shaken baby syndrome, which, Belc says, occurs more frequently with boys. Belc is a father to his three sons, whom he describes as wielding toy weapons in their play, and he worries about his anger: “Once I gripped Sean by his denim shirt and it ripped. He just wouldn’t listen. When I unclenched my fists they were full of torn collar. I turned them over; these white-knuckled things could not be a mother’s hands” (113). But in this moment of embracing his non-mother status, Belc softens: “Becoming a dad, accepting that’s what I was, made me gentler, calmer” (114). He reiterates, “I chose to accept becoming a dad. I am glad they are not babies anymore because now they cannot ever be shaken babies” (116). Through his verb choices in these sentences, Belc clarifies that he identifies with and performs fatherhood; it is not a given but something in him that he “chose” and “accepted.” And in embracing this choice, he moves away from, rather than towards, his father’s fathering. Belc is adamantly a father, not a mother.

Overall, Belc’s memoir argues for gender-neutral terms for gestation and birth within the contexts of medical care, cultural conversation, and the legal system. Yet much as the casually used terms “biological mother” or “natural mother” fail to account adequately for the experience of transmasculine

gestational parents, it remains equally essential to maintain the specificity of the term “mother,” as it applies to actual caregiving (social mothering) as undertaken by women (cis or trans) who care for children, regardless of whether they share a genetic or gestational connection, for reasons of equity. In disimbricating these three types of “mothers” (genetic, gestational, and social), we open up awareness of the plentitude of familial structures that arise with reproductive technology, for queer families of all kinds, as well as heterosexual couples who use third-party reproduction. Honouring such differences requires that we regender the term “mother” for those not afforded the privileges of fathers under patriarchy. Following Andrea Doucet’s work in *Do Men Mother*, I would argue that men (cis or trans) do not actively mother children, although they may in fact act as primary caregivers. Mother is a gendered verb.

Although this statement would seem obvious, the push to degender motherwork has been baked into the study of mothers and motherhood for decades. Sara Ruddick’s argument that “maternal thinking” and practices can be performed by men and others who do not identify as mothers is foundational in this regard (107). Although I do not disagree with the fundamental argument about who can do what well, framing those acts of care rhetorically as “maternal” does a disservice to all caregivers, whose work occurs in particular intersectional social contexts. To put a sharper point on it, to say that men “mother” children by caring for children—as Garbes does—is to continue to understand such behaviours as feminine and therefore feminize or exclude nurturing behaviours undertaken by fathers, including transmen such as Belc. As AJ Lowik explains, “Labelling all nurturing behaviour performed by men as ‘acts of mothering’ may contribute to the invisibility of nurturing fathers—men may ‘mother,’ but if they identify as fathers are not all of their acts of parenting acts of fathering?” (213). In this regard, it is equally essentialist and problematic to use the term “natural mother” to describe a transmasculine parent (indeed, thinking about his propensity towards violence, Belc says he does not have “mother’s hands”).

Ultimately, supporting carework and those who perform it requires that we acknowledge that acts of care are both embodied and gendered under patriarchy. Acts of care are intersectional practices demanding specificity rather than universality in our descriptions. The term “parent” might be inclusive, but it is not equitable. As Doucet explains:

While they [fathers] can develop ways of being and thinking that emulate what we consider stereotypical mothering behavior or what Marilyn Friedman has called the ‘symbolically feminine’ (Friedman, 1993, 2000), fathers do not mother in practice, partly because mothering itself is a richly varied experience and institution (Rich, 1986). They also do not mother because the everyday social worlds,

the embodied experiences of women and men, and the larger ‘gender regime’ (Connell, 1995, 2000) do not permit eliding of the two institutions and distinct identities. Rather than comparing fathers to mothers, we require novel ways of listening to and theorizing about fathers’ approaches to parenting. (224)

As this essay contends, one such way of “listening to and theorizing” is by reading the memoirs of parents who operate outside the traditional binary, including queer mothers and transmasculine gestational parents, such as Krys Malcolm Belc and Jennifer Finney Boylan.

To underscore a central point: No parent should have their identity erased by deadnaming or misgendering, as Belc’s memoir powerfully illustrates. But eliminating the term “mother,” or erasing its embodied specificity, comes at a price. As both verb and noun, the term “mother” should be mobilized strategically to describe caregivers and caregiving undertaken by individuals who do not identify as fathers. I take a cue here from Fiona Joy Green and Gary Lee Pelletier’s edited collection *Essential Breakthroughs: Conversations about Men, Mothers, and Mothering*, which strives to “find the right balance between combating gender essentialism and honouring the differences that define our lives,” particularly given the “social, political, and intellectual maternal aversion” of the present moment (6).

That is, while I do not want to exclude the experiences of transmasculine individuals as individual birthing people and parents—and will continue to use the terminology they use to describe their own experiences—I want to suggest that the broader cultural shift towards “inclusive” (rather: ungendered) language is illustrative of a kind of anti-maternal misogyny.¹ I also want to maintain the particular intersectional need for the term “mother” as applied to both cisgender and transwomen who act as caregivers and social mothers for children. In holding space for both cis- and transgender mothers, I am certainly not advocating for unchecked pronatalism or essentialism but rather acknowledging the particularity of mothers’ experiences. For instance, in her discussion of parenting, Boylan acknowledges her position as a woman who did not have a girlhood and a mother who has had the experiences of boyhood and the privileges afforded to those who are, or pass as, straight white men. Memoirs by queer parents, cisgender and trans, call attention to the problem of inadequate language and present a more nuanced understanding of individual caregivers and families. As their narratives reveal, the arguments for degendering parenting fall flat, using the language of inclusion to stand in for anti-maternal misogyny and precise intersectionality. Jacqueline Rose opens her book on motherhood this way: “Motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human. It is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong

with the world, which it becomes the task—unrealisable, of course—of mothers to repair” (1). In the interests of being inclusive, mothers are shamed, even for claiming their status as mothers.

Much as the lens of trans studies usefully helps de-essentialize our understandings of parenthood, feminist motherhood studies remind us of the particular embodied and intersectional contexts in which carework occurs—one in which gender does matter (though perhaps not as much as we once assumed). If, as O’Reilly contends, the work of motherhood studies is to “articulate and theorize the ‘voice of the mother’” (5), we might thus understand the queer mother memoir as a fruitful site in which to explore, interrogate, and complicate what it means to become a mother within the broader cultural context of heteropatriarchy if not heterosexual marriage.

The term “mother” cannot be erased from parlance until actual mothers are afforded the privileges of fathers in culture until carework—truly divorced from gendered expectations—is valued. And as the coronavirus pandemic made abundantly clear, we are not there yet. Within North America and other contexts globally, patriarchy continues to thrive, with deeply held misogyny that extends to the work of caregiving, reproductive rights, and medical care. As such, the gender-neutral term “parent,” which pretends that equality is the same as equity, is no less patriarchal than the normative “motherhood,” critiqued decades ago by Adrienne Rich. We need to acknowledge the particularity of maternal experience under patriarchy. We also need to acknowledge the particularity of nonbinary or transmasculine pregnancy and parenthood under patriarchy. In all things, I argue for specificity and nuance rather than generalization. If we understand “mother” not as an innate identity but as a series of acts/verbs that constitute carework undertaken by non-fathers in specific, intersectional contexts, we approach an understanding of “mother” (and, by extension, “father”) that is both inclusive and equitable.

Trans writer Raine Dozier’s essay “Guy-Moms Unite! Mothering Outside the Box” helps locate specific caregiving that is neither an uncritical patriarchal motherhood nor a gender-neutral parenthood. As Dozier says of their own (single) parenting: “‘Mother’ and ‘single mother’ are specific, gendered social locations evoking particular expected behaviors in families, but also in interactions with social institutions.... The physical and economic constraints of single parenthood and the legal status of a primary parent with fewer assets is a uniquely gendered situation” (135). They continue: “I proudly claim the identities of ‘mother’ and ‘single mother’ and all they entail in resources, time use, legal history, oppression, resistance, and life chances while retaining my masculine and male gender identity. Surely this is queering motherhood” (135). In this way, queering motherhood—forging a deliberately anti-heteropatriarchal motherhood—requires more than inclusive language.

If queer families help us begin to see beyond the binary and the nuclear to more capacious family forms, memoirs of queer families offer language and stories that help us to rewrite social scripts. Belc's story of transmasculine gestational parenthood is only one version of queer family building. Much like the argument Doucet makes in *Do Men Mother*, in her memoir *Stuck in the Middle with You*, trans advocate Jennifer Finney Boylan discusses the nature of parental nurture and claims, in explicit contrast to Ruddick:

At the heart of this theory [that "mothering" can be done by anyone of any gender] seems to be an assumption that caring for children is something women do. If you're a man and you're trying to nurture and protect your kids, it seems to me as if you're being called an honorary woman.

There are lots of men who don't feel that expressing love makes them honorary women. One would think it makes them fathers. (30)

Boylan's book, rather than either reifying a binary of mother vs. father or eliding the term "mother" of its gendered specificity, uses personal narrative and interview to suggest the vast range of carework undertaken in myriad intersectional contexts. Throughout, Boylan explores gender and division of labour in a two-parent household and the evolving nature of parenting: "There was a time once when motherhood and fatherhood were states as simple to define as *woman* and *man*. But as the meanings of *male* and *female* have shifted from something firm and unwavering into something more versatile and inconstant, so too have the terms *mother* and *father* become more permeable and open-ended" (204). In exploring how parental identity informs carework, Boylan's memoir theorizes not gender-neutral parenthood but the vast possibilities that move beyond the binary. As Boylan puts it:

I wonder sometimes if I am fathering my children without maleness.... There was a time when I thought, No, I need to be more womanly with my sons because otherwise I'm shortchanging my identity as female. But now I believe that parenthood is a mutable experience. There's a lot of room for me to be whoever I want to be with my children without having to lose any of my own identity. (254)

More broadly, Boylan explains, "Surely, if we make room for the mutability of gender, we have to accept that motherhood and fatherhood themselves are no longer unalterable binaries either" (205). Rather, looking at statistics, Boylan claims, "As it turns out, the biggest outlier in our culture is not same-sex couples, or transgender people, or adoptive parents, or single fathers, but the so-called traditional American family itself" (206).

As Boylan suggests, acts of carework occur within particular contexts, depending on gender, class, race, and family configuration, among the

numerous other contextual and intersectional understandings of our lives. My experience of the pandemic as a single parent by choice was radically different from the experience of a married friend with two children under the age of five or a divorced and remarried friend raising three children under shared joint custody arrangements. Or another single mother who lives and parents with chronic pain. These examples are not hypothetical but come from my community. Yes, as Garbes insists, acts of care can be undertaken by any parent of any gender. But care also occurs in a specific body. Care occurs in a specific home. This essay opened with an epigraph from a poem by my friend and colleague Divya Victor, “Care Is a Verb,” in which she outlines the various acts of care undertaken by a hybrid, fictionalized caregiver over the course of the day. As the poem forcefully urges, we need to care about caregiving, and in doing so, it is incumbent upon us to consider the context in which acts of care occur. Care is not an abstraction but embodied labour.

Memoirs of queer family, such as Belc’s and Boylan’s, offers a space in which we might think about the stories we tell about the lives that we lead, and those stories do have social and political significance. If, as Margaret Gibson reminds us, “Queer brings the political and the social into a self-conscious connection with the intimate” (1), queer memoir offers an ideal place to explore such connection, with an inherent focus on both the interiority of the “I” who speaks and also the intimacy of the partnership and family. Memoir is particularly critical as an area in which to understand the work lives of marginalized individuals, and queer mothers, as both queer and mother, are at least doubly so. As O’Reilly and Elizabeth Podnieks note in their introduction to *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts*, “Autobiography (including diary and memoir) is an especially valuable arena in which we can register and understand the ways that women inscribe an ‘I’ or series of ‘I’s in the authoring of their own maternal selves, accounting for and expressing awareness of factors such as the body, sexuality, gender, race, class, and nationhood” (7). In short, they offer truths about the experiences of contemporary motherhood. Julie Avril Minich takes a similar approach regarding the work of queer memoir in general, arguing that such works “are an antidote to the hate-filled ‘lies’ of a homophobic America” (59).

Queer mother memoirs testify to the complicated nature of identity that arises when butch, nonbinary, or transmen gestate, give birth, and care for children. Yet for cisgender women mothering in patriarchy is no less complicated. And, indeed, assuming it is, arises from the same patriarchal, pronatalist, and essentialist logic. If we understand the mother through the lens of trans studies, the sex-gender-reproduction triad is divorced and de-essentialized but not disembodied. We cannot be postmaternal because we have never really been matricentric. Or motherhood remains an ideal to which no mother can ever possibly conform.

It is within mother memoirs by queer writers that we can understand ways that individual parents understand and narrate their experiences—the ways that they understand the acts of care they undertake, acts that shape their subjectivity and perform it in a variety of private and public contexts that are read by audiences in the forms of family, neighbours, and communities, as well as the broader audience of readers of their books. In the end, telling stories of queer families begins to unravel some of these assumptions and to write new stories of family, ones that will—eventually—lead to real social change.

Endnotes

1. Although the contexts of public health are beyond the realm of my expertise as well as the contours of this analysis, it is worth acknowledging as Karleen D. Gribble et al. contend, that there are material consequences to the unsexing of pregnancy: “It behooves us therefore to be certain of how women’s needs and children’s developmental prerequisites may be affected by these changes in language and how they might impact advocacy for maternal and child health and human rights” (2).

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Motherblame-Stigma and Institutional Gaslighting: Obscuring Failures in Child Disability Care Infrastructures

Mothers of children with mental illness are on the frontlines of two global crises. The rates and severity of children's mental illness have been rapidly growing, increasing the need for services and community supports. At the same time, four decades of privatization and austerity have resulted in what Emma Dowling calls "the care crisis," including a state of disarray in the children's mental health service sector. The intersection of the children's mental health crisis with the care crisis makes it impossible for many children to access hospital beds for mental health emergencies and community-based disability services necessary to keep them alive and in their own homes. Mothers overwhelmingly bear the economic and social burdens of filling in disability service gaps. Furthermore, the very agencies charged to serve children with disabilities depend on the exploited and appropriated unpaid labour of their mothers. This article introduces the concept of "motherblame-stigma," a social prejudice in the form of social disgrace, blame, and distrust of mothers related to a stigmatized characteristic of their child. After tracing the history of motherblame-stigma for children's mental illness, I apply an epistemic oppression framing to illustrate how motherblame-stigma functions to prevent mothers from correcting distorted public narratives about child disability service infrastructures (a contributory injustice) and to sow self-doubt within mothers about their own experiences and capabilities (gaslighting). I provide examples of institutional gaslighting in state policy, law, public statements, and narratives to blame mothers for failing to seek and navigate services that do not exist.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 14 per cent of the world's children and youth aged ten to nineteen live with a mental health condition, most of which are "unrecognized and untreated" (WHO, "Mental

Health” 1). Although this crisis is not new, it was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a 24 per cent increase in mental-health emergency room visits for children aged five to eleven and a 31 per cent increase for children aged twelve to seventeen (Leeb et al. 1677). The pandemic also brought attention to what Emma Dowling calls “the care crisis.” This is the state of disarray in various care service sectors because of privatization and austerity (3). As the Care Collective points out, this crisis predates COVID-19 by forty years (3).

Only 51 per cent of the WHO’s 194 member states had mental health policies consistent with human rights instruments (“WHO Report”). Even in high-income nations, most youth are not receiving needed treatment (Barican et al. 36). This is particularly true in the United States (US), which, according to the Commonwealth Fund, has some of the worst mental health outcomes among industrialized countries, in part due to its relatively low workforce capacity to meet mental health needs (Tikkanen et al. 1). The US has only one child psychiatrist for every 620 children with mental illness, and only half of these children receive any mental health treatment within one year (Williams et al. 37). Not “a single state in the country has an adequate supply of child psychiatrists, and 43 states are considered to have a severe shortage” (Tyler et al. 1). Although the need for child and adolescent psychiatric hospital beds has been increasing over the last three decades, the number of such beds has been decreasing under privatized managed care (APA 85). The situation is particularly dire for youth with mental illness who require direct support services to live in their communities. For the last two decades, there has been a significant shortage of direct support professionals (DSP) in the US (Bipartisan Policy Center 4). Providers leaving states or closing shop contribute to this shortage because they cannot get accurate reimbursements from privatized Medicaid programs (Ramm 1). Getting data on this crucial workforce is difficult because the US government does not currently include DSP on its jobs list.

The lack of community-based services deprives many children of basic human needs. Those most affected often end up institutionalized or part of the juvenile justice system, far from home, cutting them off from their families and communities. This is also an economic crisis because a significant part of the workforce must leave to engage in unpaid family care labour to fill these gaps. According to estimates by the US Bipartisan Policy Center, about thirty-eight million caregivers in 2021 were unpaid, and the estimated economic value of their care reached approximately \$600 billion (5).

This economic burden does not affect people equally. Whether it is childcare, eldercare, or care for people with disabilities, the burden overwhelmingly falls on the world’s women, who make up 70 per cent of the global health workforce (Boniol et al. 1) and do three times more unpaid care work than men (UN

Women 2). The UN Census Bureau's Current Population Study shows that mothers are four times as likely as fathers to miss work due to childcare and mothers account for 95 per cent of stay-at-home parents in the US—that is, adults remaining out of the workforce specifically to take care of family members (Haines). Similar gender disparities exist among caregivers of persons with mental illness. For instance, a survey of unpaid caregivers of adult persons with schizophrenia in the US revealed that 82 per cent of caregivers were women, 90 per cent of those being mothers of patients (Sharma et al. 11). It is noteworthy that data are not publicly available on the unpaid care labour for minor children with mental illness (or disabilities in general)—specialized care made invisible by subsuming it under the “parenting” rubric.

Structures are not in place to adequately meet the needs of children with mental illness. For instance, several recent federal class-action lawsuits against US states have been filed for failing to provide federally mandated and medically necessary mental health services for children with disability (*CA v. Garcia* in Iowa; *DD v. Lyon* in Michigan; *MH v. Noggle* in Georgia). However, mothers are regularly gaslit into thinking deficits in their child's services result from their failures at service navigation, and if they just worked hard enough (as good mothers do), their children would be fine. This gaslighting often comes from the very agencies mandated to provide such care.

Over the past decade, “gaslighting” has expanded from a primarily psychological concept about interpersonal abuse to include epistemic injustices that occur in the context of structural power (Abramson; Bailey; Davis and Ernst; McKinnon; Pohlhaus; Ruiz; Shane et al.; Sweet). According to Miranda Fricker, who coined the term, an epistemic injustice is a “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (*Epistemic Injustice* 1). Fricker distinguishes between two types of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustices occur when a speaker experiences a deflated level of credibility due to a prejudice in the hearer. Hermeneutical injustices are gaps in shared interpretative resources that lead to misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and, in extreme cases, complete erasure of lived experiences that fall within those gaps. Discrimination causes both—in the case of testimonial injustices, the hearer is not believed due to prejudice. Hermeneutical injustice arises out of “hermeneutic marginalization in relation to some area of social experience. This puts them at an unfair disadvantage in comprehending and/or getting others to comprehend an experience of that kind (a somewhat indirect discrimination)” (“Evolving Concepts” 53). It is important to Fricker's account that these forms of discrimination are nondeliberate and very common, although as she points out, this does not entail non-culpability (“Evolving Concepts” 55). Mothers of children with mental illness regularly experience testimonial injustices when seeking healthcare for their children. For instance, a doctor may assume that a mother is exaggerating or distorting the needs and

behaviours of her child with disabling tics and OCD related to Tourette's syndrome. Hermeneutical injustices occur when people lack the language and understanding to distinguish between manipulative tantrums and sensory meltdowns. For instance, a dysregulated child in a grocery store is often viewed through the lens of bad parenting by onlookers. This not only shames the mother and child but obscures the fact that the child's sensory needs are not being met in the public space, something that might be remedied by universal design.

Such testimonial and hermeneutical injustices mutually reinforce a third type of epistemic injustice introduced by Kristie Dotson. Contributory injustice blocks knowers from contributing to or changing the knowledge system itself ("A Cautionary Tale" 38). When this happens, knowers experience epistemic oppression: the unwarranted exclusion of certain knowers from knowledge-production practices ("Conceptualizing" 116). Dotson's epistemic oppression framework is structural, focussing on the knowledge system itself. Fricker focusses on the intentions and behaviours of individuals during interpersonal transactions (Anderson 165). An individualist approach often leads to "bad apple" thinking—such as "well that doctor ignored you, but that was one bad doctor" or "the people in that store were rude, but that is not everyone." Such statements miss the mark. These are not random events, but regular experiences resulting from ideologies and prejudices embedded in the knowledge system.

Mothers often experience contributory injustice when they try to share their specialized knowledge with professionals who make decisions about their child's education and healthcare. Mothers have specialized knowledge through proximity to and caregiving for their children. Not only do they, as primary caregivers, spend more time with their children than professionals, but they also interact with them in a wider variety of settings. Mothers want to collaborate with professionals to ensure educational and medical plans meet their children's specific needs but regularly feel dismissed (Ryan and Quinlan, 205). Likewise, they have specialized knowledge acquired through proximity to and interactions with the service infrastructures they navigate on their children's behalf. This knowledge is valuable for evaluating and improving those infrastructures. But as the final section will argue, mothers are often systemically gaslit about their experiences with these infrastructures, resulting in maintaining the status quo.

The central feature of any form of gaslighting is that it causes its target to question the validity of their perceptions of reality, experiences, and understanding. Nora Berenstain defines structural gaslighting as "any conceptual work that functions to obscure the nonaccidental connections between structures of oppression and the patterns of harm that they produce and license" ("White Feminist Gaslighting" 734). Structural gaslighting includes

shared dominant narratives and controlling images that obscure the ways structures of oppression operate to cause harms. They are effective by hiding in plain sight. What I call “motherblame-stigma” does the conceptual work that obscures the lack of adequate care infrastructure. I define the concept as a social prejudice in the form of social disgrace, blame, and distrust of mothers related to a stigmatized characteristic of their child. This article focusses on motherblame-stigma about a child’s mental illness.

Motherblame-stigma obscures the lack of adequate care infrastructure in two important ways: Through gaslighting, mothers come to doubt their experiences navigating services, and as a social prejudice, it causes testimonial injustices when mothers do try to communicate their experiences of service navigation. It blocks uptake of those experiences and the recognition of the mother as a knower, causing contributory injustice.

Motherblame-Stigma

Motherblame is a ubiquitous phenomenon that is not unique to mental illness. It is widely felt and discussed concerning everything from decisions to work while mothering to whether to breastfeed (Eyer; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky; Reimer and Sahagian). A salient feature of motherblame is that there is no way out of it—any choice the mother makes brings disapprobation and social critique. For example, she experiences social disapprobation if she does breastfeed, breastfeeds “too long,” or if she does not breastfeed at all (Eyer 63; Umansky). What is unique about the motherblame surrounding a child with mental illness is its gravity, scope, and history. The blame is often about making bad maternal decisions and being a bad mother altogether. In the first half of the twentieth century, childhood mental illness was attributed to early childhood relationships, specifically with the mother. These accounts emerged from the child guidance movement, which between the 1920s and 1940s performed the first psychological and intelligence testing on a mass population of children with emotional and behavioural problems (Smuts 207–25; Richardson 87–107). Influenced by Freud’s psychoanalysis, these clinicians worked directly with the mothers, not the children themselves, and started to focus on mothering as the cause of the child’s problems. The sociologist Ernest Groves went so far as to declare “that even typical mothering was pathological and in need of scientific improvement” (qtd. in Waltz 353). Experts from the movement, such as the paediatrician and psychoanalyst DW Winnicott and the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim used the media of the day (e.g., books, magazines, radio, and speaking tours) to “change the behavior of mothers to prevent social disorder, crime, and disability. Only with professional guidance and scientific practice, they argued, could mothers save their children, and by extension, society: (Waltz 353).

During this period, many influential theorists identified mothers as the cause of various mental and developmental conditions, perhaps most famously Bettelheim's "refrigerator mother" whose cold personality he claimed caused autism. According to these Freudian accounts, troubling behaviour in children is essentially caused by mothers, "whose personality, sexuality, and unconscious emotions made their nurture or very being harmful" (Blum 204).

In the second half of the twentieth century, new paradigms emerged, but rather than eliminating motherblame, they changed its form. For instance, in the 1970s, "Many radical behaviorists saw infants as a "blank slate" onto which behavior was imprinted through infant-parent interactions. Lovaas's applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy presented methods for teaching absolute obedience to adults' demands and behavioral conformity as 'treatment' for autism" (Waltz 355). This treatment involved up to forty hours of repetitive drills to be carried out by the mother under professional supervision. Being a good mother required constant engagement in this "therapeutic parenting" (Waltz 355).

In "Mother-Blame in the Prozac Nation: Raising Kids with Invisible Disabilities," Linda Blum discusses another narrative arising in the second half of the twentieth century: neurological causes and pharmaceutical solutions for the child's behaviours. But as she outlines, this new paradigm also morphed motherblame: "In the era of brain-blame, few mothers are blamed directly for their child's troubles, yet many experience stigma as secondary, contributing, or proximate causes if they fail to act concertedly" (205). In both cases, fitness as a mother is redefined as "intensified action." Mothers who do not engage in this intensified action are labelled bad mothers.

Since Blum wrote about the shift from blaming the mother's being to blaming the mother's lack of intensified action, there has been rising focus on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are determinants of physical and mental health problems—both later in life and in childhood itself. This recent shift in the causal account of childhood mental illness has its form of motherblame, one that effectively combines motherblame elements from biogenic and psychogenic theories.

The phrase "adverse childhood experiences" was coined in the seminal 1998 study by Vincent J. Felitti and his research team: "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Deaths in Adults." The study consists of a survey of adults who completed standardized medical evaluation, asking if they had experienced seven categories of ACEs: "psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against the mother; or living with household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or ever imprisoned" (245). The study summarizes its conclusion as follows: "We found a strong graded relationship between the breadth of exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for

several of the leading causes of death in adults” (250). Soon other studies followed, showing connections between ACEs and mental health outcomes, not only in adulthood but also childhood, arguing such traumas rewire the young brain (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child; Shonkoff et al.).

The ACEs approach is often framed as stigma reducing, for the child changes the question from “what is wrong with the child?” to “what happened to the child?” In other words, disability is no longer represented as a deficit of the child’s essential biology. However, it might be more accurate to see the ACEs approach as stigma shifting, since the narrow understanding of trauma in the original ACEs categories in effect reduces “what happened to the child” to “what is wrong with the family” and, often more particularly, “what is wrong with the mother.”¹ As we have seen, being a caregiver is highly gendered in practice and social imagination. Historically, being a good mother has required protecting the child from harm. Even if the mother is not the perpetrator of abuse, she is expected to be the protector from such abuse (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 3; Roberts 196–202). Even if she is not the family member who is imprisoned, mentally ill, or suicidal, she is expected to make better choices to protect children from such hardships. In other words, the ACEs research has had the effect of making the caregiver the ultimate and proximate cause of the child’s mental illness—and regardless of the gender identity of the primary caregiver, that blame is gendered—for it is a continuation of motherblame. The caregiver is blamed for the child’s neurological impairment as well as for failing to meet the demands of intensified concerted effort to secure the services needed to remedy it—a continuation of motherblame from the early twentieth century.

Motherblame is stigmatizing. When the condition the mother is blamed for causing carries a stigma, it adheres to her as a courtesy stigma. In 1963, Erving Goffman introduced the term “courtesy stigma” to refer to stigma individuals face because of their proximity to stigmatized individuals. They do not themselves have the stigmatized characteristic, such as mental illness, but experience stigma due to their proximity to the person with that characteristic. Goffman notes that courtesy stigma spreads out in waves of diminishing intensity, causing people to avoid the person with mental illness and those who share in their courtesy stigma (30).

When courtesy stigma combines with motherblame, it presents a difficult amalgam of social disgrace, blame, and distrust of mothers. This is because the proximity to the stigmatized characteristic is understood in terms of causality, either through heritability, parenting, or both. Motherblame-stigma affects the way the mother is perceived socially, resulting in regular experiences of prejudice and deflated credibility, often leading to social isolation. For these reasons, many mothers attempt to hide their family situation from public view.

Motherblame and mental health stigma are deeply woven into our society. They serve as useful tools for obscuring how neoliberalism is gutting community-based services for children. As we will see in the next sections, mothers not only become scapegoats for state failures to provide child disability services, but the state presents itself as helping such mothers with navigation services for those missing services.

Motherblame-Stigma and Epistemic Gaslighting

Motherblame-stigma functions to prevent mothers from correcting distorted public narratives about child disability service infrastructures (a contributory injustice) and to sow self-doubt within mothers about their own experiences and capabilities (gaslighting). These epistemic oppressions are structural and systemic, greatly infringing on caregivers' agency as knowers.

Sally Haslanger makes a helpful distinction between systemic and structural injustices:

Structural injustice occurs when the practices that create the structure—the network of positions and relations—(a) distort our understanding of what is valuable, or (b) organize us in ways that are unjust/harmful/wrong, e.g., by distributing resources unjustly or violating the principles of democratic equality.

Systemic injustice occurs when an unjust structure is maintained in a complex system that is self-reinforcing, adaptive, and creates subjects whose identity is shaped to conform to it. (22)

Motherblame-stigma fuels structural injustices that distort the fact that needed services are not accessible and organize systems to exploit unpaid and invisible care labour. In this section, the case study of Iowa illustrates motherblame-stigma unjustly distributing blame for why children are not getting needed services—it blames parental service navigation failure for what is the result of decades of cutting programs and the privatization of the state's Medicaid program. Motherblame-stigma does the conceptual work that Alison Bailey calls structural gaslighting:

It happens when knowers attribute epistemic harm to imagined individual character flaws and poor choices in an effort to conceal how the mechanisms of power function to asymmetrically distribute harms in ways that fortify the social structures and practices that enable the violence to continue. Complex systems of domination require structural gaslighting, among other things, to keep their infrastructures in good working order. (667)

Below I examine how the state of Iowa engaged in institutional gaslighting through public speech, law, and policies to imply that children were not receiving needed mental health supports due to parental failure to seek services for their children (rather than the state's failure to provide federally mandated services). I will show how motherblame-stigma is systematic. It is maintained by a complex system of mutually reinforcing levels of epistemic gaslighting, affecting not only what uptake caregivers' experiences receive from others, but their own subjectivity. It operates on institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels.

The phrase "institutional gaslighting" refers to gaslighting within or by organizations. Current literature refers to cases in which a person with institutional authority gaslights either other individuals within that organization through interpersonal interactions or individuals outside of that organization through public statements by the organization (Aguilar; Johnson; Keiler; Matthew). Both cases focus on disingenuous speech acts. For example, when an attempt to protect the reputation of an organization is described as an institutional investigation (Kennedy-Cuomo; Urban Dictionary). I want to draw attention to how institutions also gaslight through policies, legal codes, practices, and control over narratives.

Iowa's Mental Health Redesign provides a case study. In 2012, the Iowa Acts Chapter 1120 (Senate File 2315) directed the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) to redesign the health and disability system "where a set of core mental health services are locally delivered, regionally administered, and meet state-wide standards of care" (Iowa Department of Human Services).

On March 12, 2014, I attended a Family & Youth Focus Group. Ask Resources, a nonprofit child disability advocacy organization, contracted with Iowa to carry out a series of these focus groups around the state to describe the rollout of the system redesign and its impact on children with disabilities. Parents in attendance, overwhelmingly mothers, were excited because Iowa did not have a children's mental health system, and advertising for the event, as well as news coverage interviewing spokespeople for the state, said that the redesign included services for children. However, I learned at that meeting that while core mental health services were being added for adults, the redesign only offered children two things: a paediatric integrated health home (PIH) and a children's disability workgroup, neither of them mental health services. Even after mothers stated this through press conferences and statehouse rallies (Jensen), state's spokespersons continued to represent the PIH and committee as services. For example, from a *Des Moines Register* article published on December 3, 2014:

Amy Lorentzen McCoy, a spokeswoman for the Iowa Department of Human Services, said earlier this week that the state has been adding some services for children with mental illness. Those include

Integrated Health Homes, which are designed to coordinate assistance for physical and mental health issues at the same time. McCoy said in an email to the Register that nearly half of the 18,577 Iowans using that new service are children. McCoy also noted that a “children’s disability work group” was set up under the state mental health redesign. (Leys)

This is an example of institutional gaslighting because it concealed the failure to add core child services with the implication that children were not accessing services because mothers were not adequately navigating systems—a form of motherblame.

Another illustration of institutional gaslighting is the frequent use of child in need of assistance (CINA) legislation to obtain needed mental health care for children with high needs. A *Des Moines Register* article describes how this happened to the Woodley family (Rood). They adopted Sam, a child with significant mental illness from the foster care system. After several years, Sam’s condition worsened, and he started to engage in behaviour that was dangerous to his siblings. The Woodleys tried to get Sam help, but no appropriate community services existed, nor could he access a bed in a residential facility. Things became quite bad, and the only way they were able to protect their other children was to put Sam in an emergency youth shelter—a heartbreaking choice because the shelter did not meet Sam’s mental health needs and took him away from his family. The parents were told by their caseworker that the only way they could get Sam into a treatment program was if they filed for CINA case.

CINA is the part of Iowa Juvenile Justice Code (§232) that removes a child from their home because of abuse and neglect and relinquishes parental custody. Parents of children with mental illness unable to access the services their child needs are often encouraged by caseworkers to file a CINA case, claiming that once children are wards of the state, they will be eligible for the very few services that do exist. The relevant part of the law defines a child in need of assistance as one: “Who is in need of treatment to cure or alleviate serious mental illness or disorder, or emotional damage as evidenced by severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or untoward aggressive behavior toward self or others and whose parent, guardian, or custodian is unwilling to provide such treatment” (232.96A.6). However, the Woodleys were not unwilling to provide treatment. They were unable to because treatment was not accessible in the state. After filing a CINA, Sam was shortly placed in a residential facility, but it soon closed, and the state could not find another placement. DHS put him back in the foster care system. So, Sam was removed from a loving family and is still unable to access services. Sam’s parents lost Sam by trying to save him and had to do it by legally stating they were unfit parents.

Institutional gaslighting also occurs through entrenched organizational practices. For instance, managed care organizations (MCO) and PIH teams require extensive meetings and phone calls with the mothers to obtain services. These meetings are represented as “care coordination,” but because the needed services are often not available, the only interventions are often the meeting itself, which require additional unpaid labour of the mother, who has to document and report personal details about the child and family and any supports mothers could cobble together (through their service navigation or unpaid caregiving labour). In other words, the meetings amount to state surveillance of the family and a bureaucratic appropriation of the mothers’ labour. The state or a MCO will now document that child as having certain services and supports even though they played no part in acquiring them. This is an example of institutional gaslighting through policy.

Certain institutions are uniquely positioned to disseminate and reinforce gaslighting narratives. The motherblame narratives associated with Freudian psychology, brain blame, and ACEs are examples. These paradigms were taught and spread by professional schools, certification training, public outreach, and institutional cultures within child-serving institutions. I have learned as a mental health advocate that motherblame-stigma is felt most strongly within institutions meant to serve children with mental illness. I have always been saddened about how many professionals come to me in confidence to share their family’s story and say they could never let their coworkers or employers know for fear of the stigma hurting their career. As one mother working within the DHS once told me, how would the state let her help children once they saw her as a “bad mother” herself? These harmful gaslighting narratives are reinforced at the interpersonal and internalized levels.

An often-discussed form of interpersonal gaslighting is medical gaslighting —“when health-care professionals downplay or blow-off symptoms” (Sebring 2; see also Bailey; Barnes; Berenstain, “Stem Cell”; Ruiz). Parents sometimes experience this when reporting their child’s signs and symptoms. However, when interpersonal gaslighting is used to maintain the illusion that there is an adequate children’s mental health system, it is different from medical gaslighting, which is about the patient’s medical condition. In these cases, parents are constantly referred out from doctors, therapists, and educators to services that are simply unavailable, and these referrers often do not believe the parent when they report back their experience of chasing circles in attempts to find the supposed services.

When motherblame-stigma is internalized, it affects the mother’s internal dialogue and decision-making, sometimes resulting in self-gaslighting. It is common for mothers to attempt to follow up on a doctor’s referral only to find the service no longer exists, is not accepting new patients, or is not what the

referrer presented it to be. Self-gaslighting makes the mother think the problem is her failure to work hard enough. Her life becomes dominated by the search for elusive services. In the meantime, she is blamed for both her child's mental health condition and the inability to acquire appropriate care for that condition.

Motherblame-stigma places mothers of children with mental illness in a double bind: The intense actions required to be a fit mother (seeking out needed services for her child) reveal her to be an unfit mother (because her child has mental illness). As a result, self-gaslighting can take two forms. The first goes like this: "I am a good mother, so I must have imagined those symptoms. My kid is really fine and does not need services." Ironically, this form of self-gaslighting is recognized by mental health systems and agencies, which attempt to get such parents to recognize the symptoms and seek out services through stigma-reducing campaigns. Although such parents do exist, the prevalence of stigma-reduction campaigns can give the public the impression that the reason children in general are not receiving services is parental attempts to avoid stigma (not the lack of an adequate care infrastructure). What gets obscured is the countless parents already engaged in an intensive search for services for their child.

The other form of internalized self-gaslighting takes this form: "My child's mental health is suffering, he needs services, and we have not yet acquired those services because I am bad at navigating the system. I am a bad mother. I just need to work harder. I need to be a better mother." This form individualizes a structural problem as the failure of a particular mother—the very goal of institutional gaslighting. This makes mothers vulnerable to the exploitation of unpaid labour discussed above.

Conclusion

Parents of children with mental illness experience systemic gaslighting. Motherblame-stigma manifests on all levels (i.e., internal, interpersonal, and institutional) to undermine a mother's direct perceptions of her child's lack of access to a full continuum of community-based mental health care and supports. This gaslighting causes society to blame parental failure of service navigation as the cause for the child's lack of care rather than the lack of infrastructure itself. The parent internalizes this and engages in concerted action to cobble together care for the child in an ad hoc fashion. This labour gets appropriated and exploited by the systems responsible for, but failing to, provide the infrastructure in the first place. Institutions perpetuate this gaslighting through public relations campaigns, legal codes, policies, and their power to control narratives among professionals, whose training they certify.

Endnotes

1. There is an emerging movement to expand ACEs to include harms beyond the home, such as expanding the concept of adversity to include witnessing violence in the community, experiencing bullying, and living in foster care (Cronholm et al.). I applaud this movement for its structural lens.

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Visual Essay: Perspectives on Motherhood, Labour, and Emerging Technologies

This visual essay traces the concept of “full-time mother” proposed by Gillian Ranson in the first volume of this journal. It connects the concept to contemporary notions of motherhood, concerning how emerging technologies mediate the home and the workplace as prime contexts for mothering. In this visual essay, we think through images and symbols of work, technologies, and spaces using the means of collage and scan art while analyzing and critiquing the contemporary entanglement of motherhood and work, especially as digital technologies (re)produce the mandate that mothers need to excel both at home and at work. Moreover, through technological designs and narratives, we explore how excelling in those two realms is a measure and a standard for so-called good motherhood. The technologies studied and visually depicted include breast pumps, smart screens, and motherhood-related apps. Our visual and analytical exploration leads us to develop the concept of “prototypical motherhood,” a term that we use to refer to the performative role of motherhood as mixed with the dynamics of productive work, which points towards progress, efficiency, and economic growth. In this sense, mothers must work in specific ways to meet certain ideals, promises, and standards. Prototypical motherhood operates as the dispositif, in Foucauldian terms, to frame what is possible for mothers and what mothers are capable of and able to control, so they remain within the confines of the overlapping relationship of care and productive work. We conclude with design provocations to reimagine technology and motherhood, and how this discussion could be extended to the social structures where we live today.

Motherhood, Labour, and Emerging Technologies

This visual essay has resulted from hours of conversations full of anecdotes, reflections, and discussions on what it means to mother in the United States (US) today. Our transnational experiences as Latina women who immigrated

to the US between 2018 and 2019 and became first-time mothers are the precedent for this work. Our intersections of gender, race, class, and academic background have been impacted by the way we experience the US politics of migration, with an increased sense of nonbelonging, especially with the rise of right-wing governments and policies demarcating who belongs here and who does not. In navigating belonging and rethinking the concept of family, we constantly negotiate the epistemologies of our upbringing in Colombia and Mexico, which share values and worldviews, with the values of American society and its visions of motherhood.

These negotiations have become evident in our academic work and our personal experiences as mothers. We constantly find ourselves thinking about or doing work while taking care of our daughters. Thinking together about this, we began to see how mothering and work have porous borders, as mothering is not only about caring for children but also about negotiating work before, during, and after caring. Where is the line? Is there a line? And if so, who demarcates it? The fact that we encounter a shock between being a mother and struggling to give boundaries to our productive work shows how these two spheres of our lives are interconnected. We realized that everything around us blurs the line. Spaces, objects, technologies, policies, discourses, and emerging technologies construct contemporary ideals of motherhood that have made the line less evident.

In this article, we position motherhood as a cultural construct shaped by discourses, laws, design practices, objects, spaces, technologies, and institutions, which are marked by power and privilege and therefore define not only the role of mothers but also the structure of contemporary US society. In this sense, motherhood is more than a phase in life or an identity one can identify with. It is a socioeconomic, cultural, political, and technological construct. To construct an analysis of how labour, technologies, and spaces are interconnected in the concept of motherhood, we begin by tracing antecedents of the relationship between motherhood and work through the contributions of various scholars—including Gillian Ranson, Sharon Hays, and Eileen Boris—to demonstrate how the home has historically been a contested space shaping and reconfiguring what is culturally expected of mothers and the different kinds of labour they perform. From there, we trace the evolution of the motherhood-work-place relationship by analyzing three sites where we identify contemporary tensions regarding mothering and reproductive labour. We name these sites: everywhere, home office, and bodies. We engage with these sites visually and propose a series of collages and scan art that drive the discussion about the way that technologies and users cocreate a specific reality for mothering.

Tracing Concepts of Motherhood Concerning Work

Twenty-five years ago, in the first volume of this journal, Gillian Ranson introduced the concept of the “full-time mother,” framing motherhood experiences concerning women’s roles as workers in and outside the home. Through her analysis of forty interviews with mothers in Alberta, Ranson found that the discourse of motherhood was largely shaped by the expectation that women must stay “full-time” at home to care for children. Ranson used the term “full-time” not only to demarcate time at home but also to classify the employment status of working mothers and the time they had available to spend with their children (58–62). Throughout the article, it became evident that even mothers who stayed at home did not spend all their time caring for their children, as many were engaged in other forms of work at home. Ranson concluded that the idea of the “full-time mother” serves as an ideological and symbolic device to confine mothers to the home, regardless of whether their work involved childcare or other forms of paid labour (65).

In 1993, Sharon Hays discussed the nuances and tensions of “intensive motherhood”—an ideology promoting the idea that the appropriate methods for mothering are often child centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbed, labour intensive, and financially costly. In her work, Hays questions the assumptions underlying intensive motherhood and its approach to childrearing. Some of these questions address how ideologies of institutions and products entering the home are being infiltrated into the family space, making it increasingly difficult to ideologically separate the private (the home) from the public sphere. According to Hays, these ideologies introduce the language of impersonal, competitive, commodified, efficient, profit-driven, and self-interested relations. Much of Hays’s discussion emphasizes that intensive motherhood does not fully align with the rationalization of life under capitalism. If capitalism offered efficient ways of performing all kinds of work, it could also lead to making childrearing, and mothering in general, less time consuming and more efficient. She even argues that by staying at home to mother intensively, mothers may not be merely accepting their condition but could also be resisting, or even opposing, social relations based on impersonal contractual systems prioritizing individual gain.

Eileen Boris’s concept of “sacred motherhood” from 1985 also helps to make visible the relationship between mothering and work. Boris illustrates how motherhood ideals shaped the 1930s political debates on women’s rights to work at home. The interference of gender-based social norms of sacred motherhood in these debates led to the banning of homework (productive activities connected to factory work, such as repairing shoes, performed at home), ultimately limiting work options for mothers, particularly those reliant on income due to insufficient employment opportunities for men at that time (745–63).

The work of Ranson, Hays, and Boris shows how discourses, ideals, politics, products, and labour conditions have shaped motherhood, its relations to the home, and the extent to which reproductive and care work can be performed in and outside the home. There is a reciprocal relationship between home, labour, and motherhood, as they have historically shaped one another.

Ranson's concept of "full-time mother" remains relevant for analyzing motherhood and mothering about both productive and reproductive labour. Ranson's work, similarly to Boris's in 1985, frames the ideal of motherhood as that of a Western and middle-class white woman staying at home to care for her children. Today, changes in gender roles, technology, and labour relations have expanded motherhood identity and ideologies to new spaces—especially the office. Mothers now can continue mothering intensively full-time as emerging technologies afford performing reproductive work in the office thanks to the popularization of electronic and now digitally empowered breast pumps. Simultaneously, other emerging technologies, labour relations, and global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have accelerated the integration of productive labour into the home.

Digital innovations for twenty-first-century motherhood in the US revolve around enabling (even more) work for mothers. This operates under an assumed conflict between productive work and caring work that needs to be resolved for the benefit of women, merging multiple forms of labour (productive and reproductive) into technological practices that suggest that mothers can, and should, efficiently and productively work anywhere, anytime. Yet these technological innovations further a social narrative of progress, which is tied to a moral judgment about the betterment of society, in this case, crystalized as a model for a good mother. As Jennifer Daryl Slack and John Macgregor Wise explain, "Culturally, the tendency to equate the development of new technology with material and moral betterment typically operates without making the assumptions explicit. In part, that is how assumptions gain their power. To interrogate them explicitly is to demystify their power" (11). Nowadays, excelling both at home and work is the standard for good motherhood. These ideas are supported by the "having it all" ideology that gained traction in the 1980s but continues to invite working mothers, particularly those in corporate environments, to remain as never-ending productive human capital, even during times of intense reproductive labour, such as the postpartum periods. In conclusion, we refer to "prototypical motherhood" as a standardized motherhood ideal that demarcates what is acceptable, possible, and imaginable for mothers concerning work. Prototypical motherhood, thus, disciplines mothers to be workers of a certain kind in and outside the family. Through images and symbols, we explore how these phenomena coexist as they also transform our notions and uses of physical spaces.

Images and Symbols of Motherhood and Work

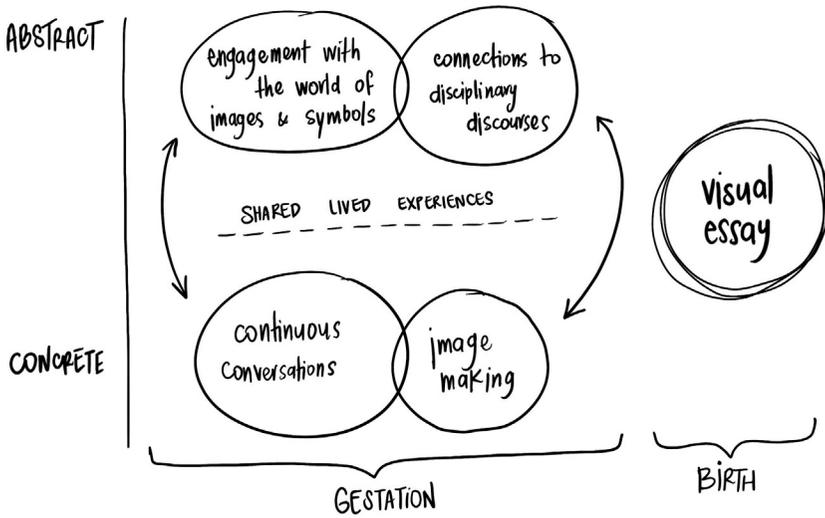


Figure 1. Visual description of the creative process to generate this visual essay

We found a moment to converge our intellectual and creative interests in motherhood, labour, and technologies, gestating ideas through continuous exchanges and conversations. The collage and scan-art pieces are both spaces to converge some of these conversations into a visual narrative, but more importantly, they are mechanisms to think through visuals and deepen our relationship to the image and symbol of motherhood (Figure 1).

We engaged with the visual narratives in advertising of motherhood-related technologies, used images from our households, and began a process of abstraction to convey meaning through repetition and fragmentation, which emerged as visual strategies in the creative process.

In the images, we highlight the role of objects and spaces because they have been designed with intention, many times congruent with the logic of the market and mass production. As Arturo Escobar affirms, “In designing tools, we (humans) design the conditions of our existence and, in turn, the conditions of our designing. We design tools, and these tools design us back” (10). This is in line with what feminist scholar and designer Anne Balsamo termed “technoculture,” or the inextricable relationship between technologies and society in their overlapping processes of constant becoming (4–7). We find it important to critically look at designed systems, places and practices to find the cultural meaning of technologies, and in this case to scrutinize the ways they afford a nuanced understanding of motherhood and work.

As we think about our relationship to space in the US, design emerges as the connecting tissue, since it is through objects and practices that we exercise our motherhood. Thinking through images also allows us to access dimensions of thought beyond analysis, towards a sensibility for the aesthetics of objects, and their explicit and conceptual connections to space.

The work of mothering (what we refer to here as reproductive work and care work) and the productive work that earns a wage are not divided anymore. The collages emerged precisely because of this overlap. Indeed, we contend that there is no other way, outside of this juxtaposition, to describe the way that motherhood functions as a cultural construct and as a lived experience at the individual and collective levels today. As we began to work with objects and practices, it became evident that space is central to this conversation too, prompting us to construct a scenario for each piece.

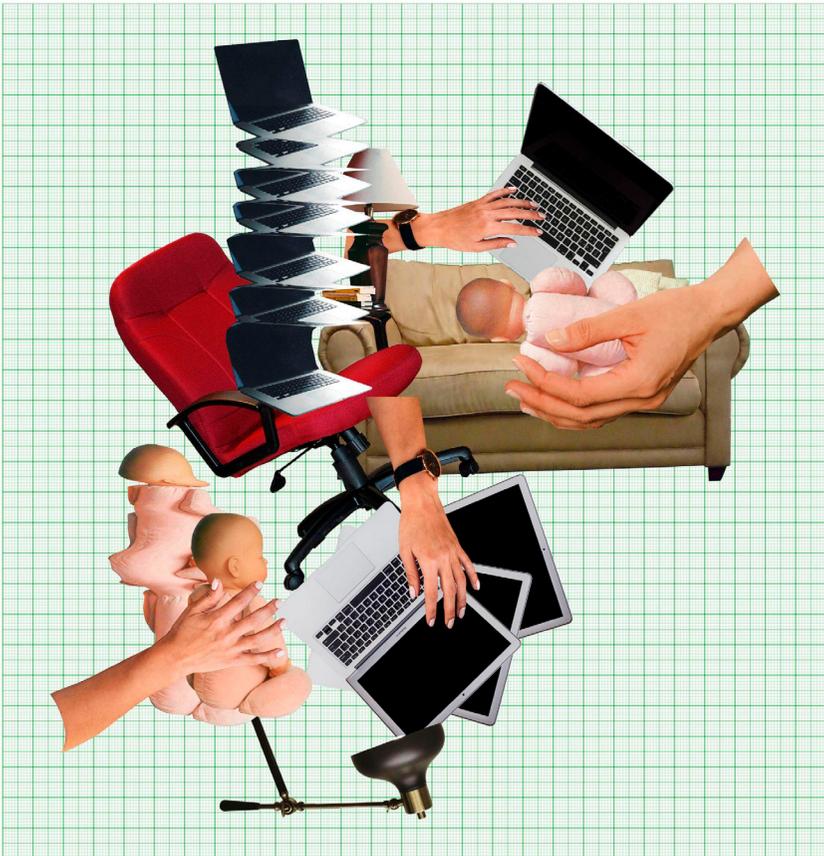


Figure 2. The overlap of mothering and productive work

In our experience, we have felt the need to split ourselves so we can do it all. Abstracting from this sensation to depict symbolic objects for the home and the office space, as well as emphasizing the simultaneity of the work, Figure 2 shows one hand taking care of a baby and the other one typing on a laptop, as a simple description of the entanglement across multiple forms of work.

With this opening image, we move into three specific sites for mothering, visually exploring how they are mediated by technologies. “Site One: Everywhere” deals with the breast pump and its ability to allow reproductive work to happen in the office space, enabling all spaces to become workspaces. “Site Two: Home Office” examines smart screens in the private space to manage the household as a productive unit and install standardized ways of doing care work. “Site Three: Bodies” explores the vast ecosystem of motherhood-related apps that create standards to measure all kinds of bioindicators and human activities to ultimately shape a certain kind of prototypical motherhood.

Site One: Everywhere



Figure 3. The breast pump and the workspace

Fully automated, portable, and disposable, contemporary breast pumps epitomize the complex relationship between motherhood and work. In recent years, the pumping culture has become the enabler of lactation experiences for working mothers in the US. The commercial and popular narratives associated with the breast pump position this device in a myriad of places. Thanks to its portability and size, and a plethora of accessories to make it more convenient, lactating people can pump breast milk in the park, on a plane, at work, at the gym, and more. However, our aesthetic decision to portray the office space as an abstraction of work in Figure 3 is a result of thinking of work as a “seed space,” one that enabled this technology to exist in the first place, thus allowing work to permeate all private and public spaces.

Common ads for the breast pump show a lactating person doing work on their laptop or participating in a meeting while pumping their breasts, and pumping while their baby is sitting next to them. The ads suggest that the breast pump increases mothers’ productivity, hence allowing them to “have it all” (work and family), especially as they help make pumping look easy and accessible. However, the simplicity portrayed in the ads falls short of accurately documenting the reality of using a breast pump. Operating this device involves arduous processes of preparing, cleaning, sterilizing, and organizing, in addition to the work of making the milk ready for consumption.

The corporate narratives associated with the breast pump deserve more scrutiny. As Michelle Millar Fisher and Amber Winick assert, “These ‘time-saving’ devices maximized productivity behind the scenes so that women could do double (or triple) duty while making it all look effortless” (259). By pumping breastmilk behind the scene, mothers seem to operate as members of a secret society, moving between home and work. Not only does the work of pumping become invisible because it is private and hence always carried out in enclosed spaces, following historical positions about the invisibility of breastfeeding (Stearns 313), but it greatly benefits employers because it ensures that employees are productive all the time, even if they are lactating. In short, the breast pump solidifies a cultural mandate of breastfeeding at all costs.

Parallel to creating more work for mothers, the forms and dynamics of labour enabled by the breast pump are mutable and already experiencing transformations based on mothers’ multiple social contexts: Some mothers at the postpartum stage with financial needs have found ways to make money with the breast pump and produce a surplus of breastmilk that can be exchanged online for money, diapers, or anything (Cassidy). The breast pump creates new forms of work while challenging traditional conceptions of productive and reproductive labour and the monetary value assigned to them.

Working mothers remain tied to the ideology of the “full-time mother,” but the home is no longer the only space in which they are expected to mother. The domestic space, once solely associated with reproductive labour, is now

everywhere—in lactation rooms at the mall, the airport, the workplace, or social events. Conversely, the workplace is no longer just the factory or office as we once understood it in the twentieth century. Productive work has returned to the home, like the preindustrial era. Mothers are now expected to mother full-time everywhere.

Site Two: Home Office



Figure 4. Smart screens and managerial thinking for the household

Akin to the monoliths that appear in the science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (sketched in Figure 5) and the colossal Barbie character that lands at the beginning of the 2023 *Barbie* movie (sketched in Figure 6), we deal with an artifact that lands at the core of a household. Just as the two visual references, its glorious presence attracts everyone's gaze, precisely because it is starkly different from its environment (Figure 4). These cinematographic

references are conducive to thinking about how motherhood-related technologies enter the private space, how they reconfigure it, and how they ultimately represent a historical merging of reproductive and productive labour by provoking the emergence of a hybrid space between home and work.

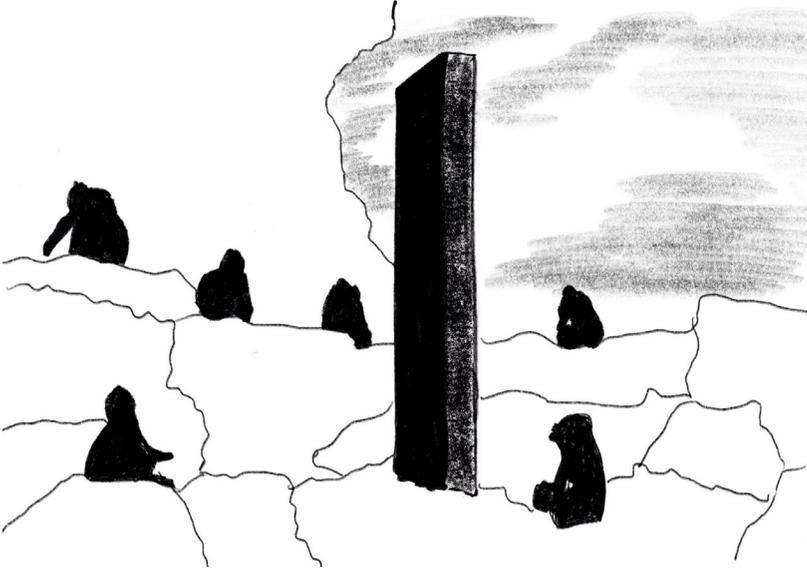


Figure 5. Sketch of a monolith from the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*

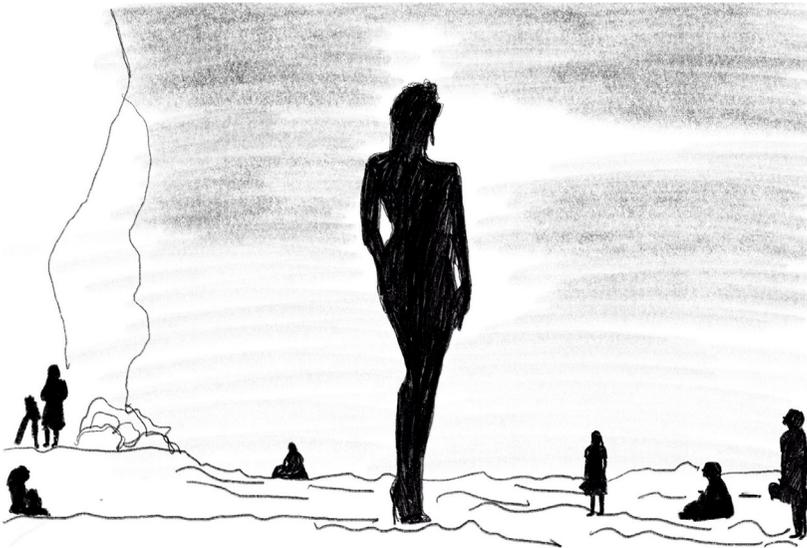


Figure 6. Sketch of a colossal figure from the movie *Barbie*

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about shifts to redesign intimate spaces and workspaces to blend them under the logic of management and control. Terms like “working from home” or “home office” symbolize this merging. In the context of motherhood, we are witnessing the proliferation of technologies for managing motherhood and housekeeping tasks. Large-scale screens or “smart displays,” embedded with software for managing tasks, are meant to be used in the private space to organize, prioritize, and delegate duties and roles, ensuring that the household runs as a productive unit.

The positioning and hierarchy of the screen in Figure 4 relate to the godlike qualities of these technologies. To achieve their purpose of maximizing efficiency, these devices promise to know more than parents about how they run the household, to recommend the best for them, and to make decisions on their behalf. Since the algorithms and internal structure of these technologies necessarily simplify and abstract the context where they operate, the fluidity of human relations is overwritten by assuming that the needs of parents and children are predictable, programmable, and, therefore, controllable.

Smart displays and other interconnected technologies are successful business models because of their ability to capture, segregate, and sell users’ data—more than their ability to create useful systems and interfaces for users. This furthers the dynamics of data capitalism, defined by Sarah Myers West as “a system in which the commoditization of our data enables an asymmetric redistribution of power that is weighted toward the actors who have access and the capability to make sense of information” (20). Capturing data and prompting decision-making are manipulative and a disguised form of control, since the ultimate beneficiaries of these technologies are profit-driven organizations that establish a hierarchical relationship with their users.

The narratives associated with smart displays relate to neoliberal feminist manifestos, such as Ivanka Trump’s book *Women Who Work*, where she refers to the time spent with children to create memorable moments as “correct investments.” Similarly, in advertisements for Heart Display, a smart screen product, its founders invite users to take care of their homes in terms of management, the same way they take care of their businesses or corporate jobs (Heart Display).

Furthermore, the symbol that these technologies represent is tied to motherhood identity. The narrative and strategies of smart displays further the idea that good motherhood is planned, organized, and efficient. Under managerial thinking, what is right is to keep the house neat and controlled and to complete tasks within an expected timeline. Conversely, it is not right to improvise or to be disorganized, to get out of the routine and to not be productive. In their efforts to standardize how households should run, tech corporations shape an ideal path for decision-making, where mothers and families are provided with a template for behavior and identity construction,

both as parents, and workers.

Physical spaces and work have been historically used to define motherhood. In 1999, Gillian Ranson explored how the extent to which mothers measured their motherhood was based on a Western ideal—rooted heavily in the experiences of middle-class white families—that assumed mothers spent all their time at home with their children doing care work. In 2024, ideals of motherhood are closely tied to productive work: Mothers who decide to stay at home have lost their value and status. To exist within this tension, we are witnessing a turn by some Latin American mothers and thinkers who advocate for reclaiming the act of staying at home with children as a valid and sufficient space for exercising motherhood, complicating ideas on the home space and solitude, and calling for embracing instead of fighting with the ambivalence of mothering across spaces (Vasquez 175–80).

As Jessica Martucci explores in the book *Back to the Breast*, mothers have historically resisted hospital policies and cultural norms, specifically the pressure of formula companies in America in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, when mothers were intentionally choosing to breastfeed (Martucci). What we see today is a kind of “back to the home” as a form of counterpressure to the productive work mandate.

In the home space, productive and reproductive work are in continuous tension. In this scenario, technologies mediate hybrid spaces to ensure that mothers are embedded in the logic of work even when planning a shopping list for the supermarket, enjoying a television show, or attempting to rest from work.

Site Three: Bodies

Similarly to the way techno-capitalism is appropriating physical spaces, it is simultaneously taking over the body as the most intimate space. The rise of digital platforms brought about the idea of measuring everything to see the body. Body tracking technologies measuring heart rate, sleep, temperature, blood pressure, and even stress levels have paved the way for technologies directed towards mothers, enabling the measurement of motherhood faster and more intensely than ever before, under the promise of easing motherhood and driving an estimated market value of two trillion dollars (Mason and Pasiëka 7–8). Today, we find digital platforms for almost every aspect of motherhood: apps that track how many diapers are changed, how much sleep the mother and baby get, how many ounces of breastmilk the baby consumes, episodes of postpartum mood swings, and more. This is the meaning in Figure 7, with the fragmentation of life across technological systems that function against a backdrop of data collection and extraction practices.



Figure 7. Fragmentation of the mothering experience in the ecosystem of apps and data gathering

What is interesting about these applications is not only the increasing compulsion to measure everything but also how they transform what is measured into an operation, meaning they function or operate within larger systems. For example, if a mother's mood swings exceed normal levels, the app may refer her to a doctor to treat what is likely postpartum depression. If the breastmilk production is deemed above or below normal, the app may suggest consulting a lactation expert. If the baby is not sleeping the right number of hours, it may connect with a sleep trainer. These apps are part of broader systems that, in operation, shape the construction of motherhood. Some of these systems are linked to medical institutions, while others are connected to nonmedical institutions, such as employers or corporations, who now, in many cases, provide these technologies as part of employee benefits. In this scenario,

working mothers suffering from postpartum depression might be referred to a therapist and depending on the root cause may even be directed to career coaches.

The body becomes fragmented within the interconnected systems of health and labour. Both systems pressure postpartum mothers to restore their bodies and return to work as soon as possible. Simultaneously, by bringing these devices into the body, tech giants and data management companies gain power over people's habits and behaviours. This is a perfect recipe for targeted advertising and the entanglement of motherhood with consumption.

The platformization of maternal health extends beyond individuals accessing apps on their devices, solidifying the role of employers as gateways to access these services. For most problems related to pregnancy, childcare, and work, startup business models include partnerships with employers, further fuelling the narrative of supporting mothers at work. This approach aims to solve the motherhood problem of having mothers stay at home and not return to work. In corporate terms, supporting motherhood means providing the tools or benefits for mothers to ease the separation from their children so that they can continue working.

The moral mandate is applicable here too, since these technologies are inseparable from our ideals of good mothering. The more app-literate the mother, the more in control she is, and the better mother she can become. Having a numerical value and a standard to reach serves as a mechanism to judge one's performance. It quantifies and standardizes the function of mothers to create specific ways of childrearing.

Prototypical Motherhood

The ideologies advanced by emerging technologies and their manifestation as social practices and physical spaces ultimately build up what we understand as motherhood in a specific manner. They create a prototype in which mothers might or might not fit. In this prototype, concepts of good and bad motherhood demarcate what mothers can or should do based on the logic of productivity, progress, and economic growth.

We refer to prototypical motherhood as a performative role that is mixed with the solution that technocapitalism has to offer. Prototypical motherhood is, as Judith Butler's concept of performative suggests, a performance people act out not as theatre but as a reiterative practice shaped by discourse. The work of Gina Chen in her study of the term "mommy blogger" is a perfect example of the performative and discursive effect of prototypical motherhood in digital culture. Her study and critique of the term asserts that it reinforces women's hegemonic normative roles as nurturers (8–13).

Prototypical motherhood serves as a dispositif in Foucauldian terms to frame what is possible for mothers and what they are capable of. The dispositive is a mechanism that maintains and exercises power within the social context in which mothers experience reality. The knowledge, discourses, laws, design practices, objects, spaces, technologies, and institutions in which motherhood and work are experienced are embedded within a mesh of power relations that demarcate what motherhood is and what can be imagined, hoped for, and acted upon. In prototypical mothering, the work-life balance ideal is nothing more than an endless loop of work, whether productive or reproductive, yet heralded as the pinnacle of modern womanhood, reinforcing the very core of what keeps motherhood gendered and isolated.

Prototypical motherhood is not a static concept or a fixed ideal towards which aspirations and identities are directed. It is better understood as emerging, always moving, in continuous internal reframing. Under this logic, motherhood is therefore mouldable, reimaginable, and possible to recreate if we readjust its internal relations.

As the work of caring is highly fragmented in the ecosystem of apps and technological solutions, we end up functioning under someone else's logic for mothering, furthering the isolation in which mothers exist. To resist this, we need to imagine ourselves differently. To resist individually and collectively, we can foster visual narratives and design practices that intentionally reimagine practices and technologies that validate and give rise to a plurality of ways for mothering. Under the overwhelming context of mothering and technology, we are left thinking about how we can design our mothering, choosing the tools we need, and how this can lead to collective forms of resistance against prototypical ways of being and doing. What set of negotiations do we need to put in place to carve space for shaping unique and not generalizable forms of mothering? What would communal ways of existing look like, and how could technologies aid us in strengthening relationships? How much pleasure and joy have been taken away from mothering and from work, and what are the paths for us to reconnect with those?

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Diary of Losing a Breast and Reflections on Mothering as an Arab

Drawing on scholarship in feminist studies, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies, this article-diary argues that motherhood—particularly as experienced by an Arab woman navigating personal loss, specifically the loss of a breast to cancer, and societal expectations—is not a static role but a dynamic practice shaped by cultural, linguistic, and feminist frameworks. This article explores how motherhood is a site of resistance and transformation against patriarchal norms by weaving together personal narratives and theoretical insights. It critically examines the limitations of language—specifically in Arabic, where the word “mother” is predominantly used as a noun—and advocates for reimagining and rethinking maternal roles as active and evolving practices. Through reflections on breast cancer, and the care exchanged between a mother and her mothering daughter, this piece positions the maternal as inherently political, thereby challenging conventional narratives of femininity and identity. Ultimately, it asserts that caregiving, loss, and resilience are acts of agency that redefine the self and resist the broader constraints imposed by patriarchal structures.

Introduction

This personal narrative situates itself within the existing literature by intertwining lived experiences with multiple theoretical perspectives, shedding light on the complex interplay between cultural expectations, language, and maternal agency. It examines how linguistic constraints and societal norms often shape and constrain the roles and identities of Arab mothers. Additionally, by reflecting on personal challenges, such as navigating the expectations of breastfeeding and confronting a breast cancer diagnosis, this article-diary underscores the resilience and agency inherent in maternal practices. Through this synthesis of personal narrative and scholarly discourse,

I seek to contribute to understanding motherhood in Arab contexts while adding to broader feminist and sociolinguistic conversations about gender, language, and identity.

On Breasts

In June of 2023, I was invited by Professor Mairi McDermott from the University of Calgary to take part in a Mother-Scholars project, one that is built on the “belief that mothers are central to who/what we become—whether it’s the stories they tell us, the traumas they pass on, the love and food through which they nourish us (or not), and so on” (IAMAS). I found myself in “a gathering ... a network by which politically motivated women ... think together carefully and critically about the structures that are actively shaping our lives” (Singh 129). This space, or what we came to call our coven, held many incredible mother-scholars; in our gatherings, we read the writings of several mother-scholars, including Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous scientist and mother. Given my focus on my breasts, as well as my own experience with breastfeeding, I found Kimmerer’s passage on breastfeeding deeply soul-quenching and compelling:

I remember my babies at the breast, the first feeding, the long deep suck that drew up from my innermost well, which was filled and filled again, by the look that passed between us, the reciprocity of mother and child. I supposed I should welcome the freedom from all that feeding and worrying, but I’ll miss it. Maybe not the laundry, but the immediacy of those looks, the presence of our reciprocal love is hard to say good-bye to. (99)

Kimmerer’s reflection highlights the intricate interplay and interconnectedness shaping a mother’s identity and resonates intensely with my breastfeeding experience. I breastfed my three children, Selma, Aamer, and Marcel, for seven and a half years in total; my middle child, Aamer, was not quenched until after three and a half years of breastfeeding. Admittedly, I am not sure that I can say he was quenched. However, under pressure from those around me, including his father (who happens to be a physician), I was persuaded to wean him. My breasts were as angry as he was at this terminal decision; they swelled, turned a resentful red, and ached to the point that breathing became painful. They leaked for days on end. Even the touch of the blouse I wore was excruciating. Their only relief was to be stroked by Aamer’s lips—a choice no longer possible. Within a week, my breasts, once like a gushing river, became completely dry as did Aamer’s baby tears.

Throughout my journey of motherhood and breastfeeding, I understood from several of my family members who happen to be medical practitioners that breastfeeding helps lower the chances of breast cancer. This assurance was so firmly embedded in my consciousness that the last news I ever expected was a diagnosis of breast cancer. On December 1, 2023, a biopsy revealed that I had stage-one breast cancer. Today, I love my breasts more than I ever did before, the way that a mother loves her sick child, but since my diagnosis six months ago, I have had to let go of one of them. I am grateful for all it has given me of femininity and life, for me and my children.

Those close to me know that I have always been obsessed with breasts. A couple of years ago, I took out an expensive loan so that I could have a breast lift after having breastfed for seven years. In my first attempt at writing, I began my short stories with a story about a Syrian woman named Zahra: “Naked, she stood across from the mirror admiring her breasts. They were perfectly round, swollen like two pomegranates. No man [or woman or person, I would have added today] had ever touched or felt their perfection. ‘What a pity,’ she lamented!” (Alatrash, *Stripped* 13). A line from Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish that I have always loved to recite on stage, with a consciously erotic note, is: “We have on this earth what makes life worth living . . . a woman leaving her forties with her apricots fully ripened” (my translation; Darwish 181). On April 16, 2024, I turned fifty, and as a woman who has just left her forties, I can relate to the comparison of breasts to ripened apricots and the intoxicatingly lingering sweetness they leave behind.

Reciting Darwish’s line on breasts was one of how I put to practice the “uses of the erotic,” as Audre Lorde teaches, where the erotic becomes power—we tap into that feminine power we possess as women to become empowered. As Lorde reminds us, “Of course, women so empowered are dangerous” (55). Indeed, my breasts have been one of the wells from which the erotic continues to flood and pour, where the erotic becomes that “most profoundly creative source . . . female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (Lorde 59).



“The Milky Way”

On Selma

After having had surgery on February 20, 2024, and reflecting on the aftermath of having lost a breast, I consider March 4, 1998, the most beautiful and blessed day of my life—the day I became Selma’s mother, and she became my daughter.

Ever since my diagnosis, Selma did not leave my side; she nursed me through the long blurry, narcotized days and, like a candle, lit up my nights. My daughter turned twenty-six a few days after my mastectomy, and she began as a resident in psychiatry in July 2024. Selma had always been the one member in our family who loves her sleep most, notorious for sleeping through tens of alarms (with tones like fire-truck sirens) every morning. But ever since my mastectomy, this changed. She became vigilant, always on high and constant alert, and awoke to the slightest change of rhythm in my breathing at night. She was up on her feet in the early morning hours, answering the alarm’s calls to administer the next dose of antibiotics. She lovingly oversaw my breakfast, lunch, and dinner, ensuring I had the nutrition needed for a swift recovery. She changed the dressing of my wound every morning while swallowing a squeamishness that originally kept her from choosing surgery as a career. It

was as if the maternal suddenly and naturally kicked in as she mothered her mother. Somehow, she knew what to do—how to mother—and how to put to practice knowledge stored in an inventory, a history, memories of a twenty-six-year mother-daughter relationship. In retrospect, I, too, had no experience in mothering or motherhood as Selma came into my life. Nonetheless, whether maternally inherent or a learned and internalized skill, Selma became no less of a mother to me than I had been to her.

In *The Breaks* (another work that we read in our mother-scholar gathering), Juliette Singh describes the aftermath of an emergency neuro-surgery she underwent as a “bodily break” and a memory with an enduring imprint on her daughter—a memory of a mother “losing her stoicism, becoming desperate and fearful and eventually warping under pain and debility” and of a memory of a “mother losing her capacity to mother” (30). In a letter to her daughter, Singh writes: “My most intimate desire is that you find a way to break with me rather than to break from me.... I yearn for our imminent break to be not an end, but an act of profound and collective renewal. In these early years of your life, I whisper to you a mantra in your sleep with the passionate hope that it will embolden you: Break with me, break with me, break with me” (29). Like Singh, in the aftermath of my mastectomy, I, too, broke, and Selma broke with me, and “in the breaking, it seemed that we were coming closer together, our bodies moving toward each other, both holding the crisis as one” (Singh 39). In the wake of a unilateral mastectomy of the right breast, I experienced a “bodily break,” where my ability to use my right arm and hand became limited—mind you, I have never been as grateful as I am today for the ability of my left hand which has spared me the indignity of not being able to pull up my underwear in the bathroom. Likewise, I have never appreciated my right hand as much as I do today; I am acutely cognizant of the faithful services it has rendered throughout my fifty years of life, half a century of services. But the simplest, most routine and taken-for-granted acts—like standing under the shower and raising my arm to wash and rinse my hair—became impossible. For weeks, I could not shower; instead, I had to soak the lower part of my body in the bathtub and then call for Selma to help wash my hair.

She would first scrub my shoulder, back, and remaining healthy breast and then use a soapy towel to clean around the lost breast with the utmost care, guarding against water nearing the raw incision where infection loomed threatening over my implant, which I did eventually lose but for different unfortunate and unnecessary reasons (see Alatrash, “I Almost Lost My Life”). Before washing my hair, she would drape a black garbage bag around my neck with graceful skill, shielding my body and wound from water. This ritual became an exercise in humility, a practice in patience akin to swallowing a bitter pill, for my pride, laced with resistance, deepened the agony, adding layers of pain and suffering to an already excruciating ordeal, both physically and mentally.

Before stepping in the bathtub, I would confess to my daughter that I was in a bitchy mood, my spirit fraught with storms, wrestling with pride's hold. Without fail, she would gently reply, "It's okay, mama. I love you"—words that unflinchingly dissolved my frustration and reminded me of a generous fate that gifted her as my daughter. The Holy Quran teaches:

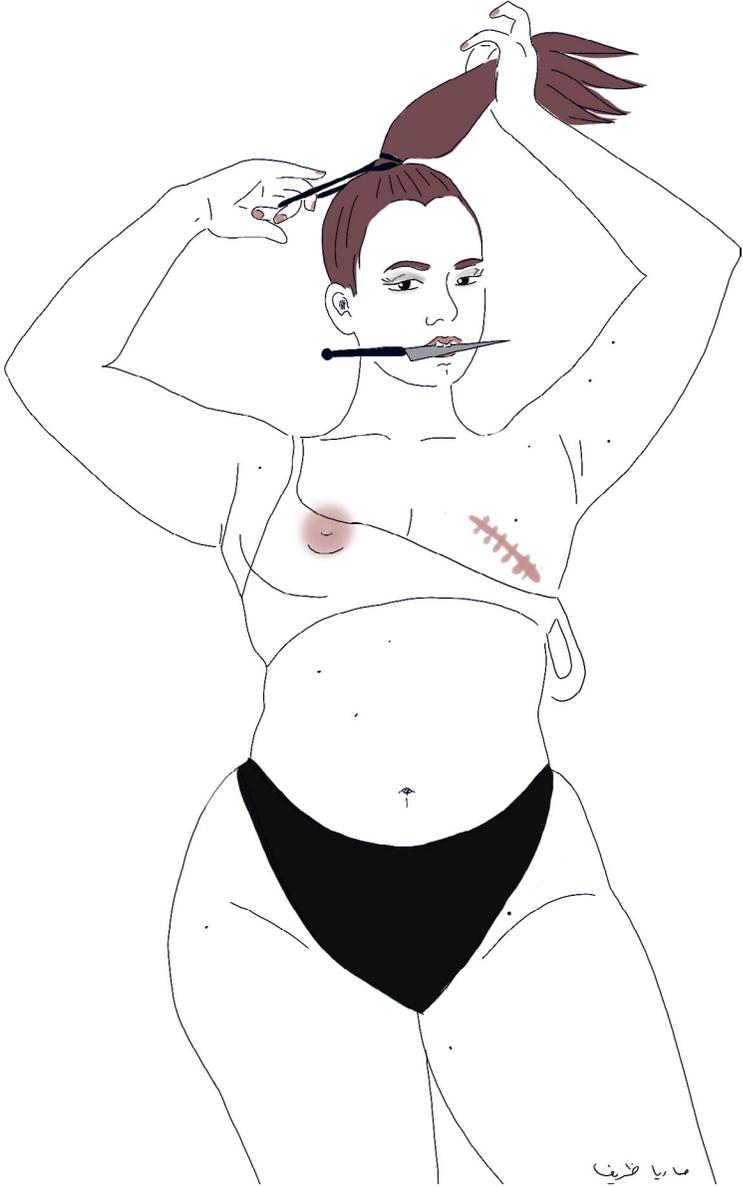
وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا ۚ إِنَّمَا يُبَلِّغُنَّ عِنْدَكَ الْكِبَرَ أَخْذُهُمَا أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا
فَلَا تَقُلْ لَهُمَا آفٌ وَلَا تُنْهَهِمَا وَكُلْ لَهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا

وَاحْفَظْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الدَّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيْتَنِي صَغِيرًا

[الإسراء: 23 / 24]

And your Lord has decreed: Do not worship any but Him; [and] Be good to your parents; and should both or any one of them attain old age with you, do not say to them even "fie" neither chide them, but speak to them with respect. And be humble and tender to them and say: "Lord, show mercy to them as they nurtured me when I was small." (17:23–24)

During a particularly long and painful night, as Selma handed me my pain medication, this verse came to mind. I recited it to her as a promise of good tidings that are to come her way. The Prophet Mohammad also speaks about mothers in his Hadith and teaches, "Be good to your mother; Paradise is under her feet" (Hadith 20). And, when asked, "O Messenger of Allah! Who is most deserving of my fine treatment?" he answers, "Your mother, then your mother, then your mother, then your father, then your nearest" (Hadith 316). I do not claim to be religious; perhaps a more fitting term is spiritual. Yet, as a daughter, I once internalized these words as though they had been inscribed by the hands of God. Today, I see these words endure in my daughter's essence and actions, beautifully realized—Selma, the culmination of my journey through motherhood, and a daughter so tender to her mother.



“The Queen of Spades”

ماریا ضیف

The Word “Mother” in Arabic Is Used Predominantly as a Noun and Not a Verb

When Selma was ten years of age, I dedicated a poem to her:

“Selma”
Someone once asked,
“What would you wish for your daughter?”
My thoughts paced back and forth
North and South, East and West,
up mountains and down valleys,
and I found no better wish
than to wish my daughter a daughter, just like her.
Someone who can be her fragrance of flowers in the arid seasons,
Her dew at dawn,
her lavender,
her cardamom tea and her BC wine,
her jasmines and her tulips,
her Mediterranean olive trees and evergreen pines,
Her East and West,
her delicate shawl on a cold night,
her salt and sugar,
her heaven and skies,
her unreached horizons,
her summer breeze,
her sublime,
her silence and what cannot be said in words,
her eyesight,
her butterflies,
her earth,
her sun and stars,
her rain,
the light of the moon,
Someone who can be her poem.
I wish for my Selma.... another Selma.

Today, sixteen years later, I would add another line: “I also wish for Selma, in her weary days, a daughter to mother her.”

Working as a translator from Arabic to English, I’m often struck by how rich the Arabic language is—its lexicon is said to exceed twelve million words, and it is spoken by over 422 million people (native and non-native) (Hakem 39). Yet ever since I began to write about mothers, mothering, and motherhood, it struck me that the Arabic word for mother, “Umm” (أم), is primarily used as

a noun, with only rare instances of it being used as a verb—particularly in classical poetry. The *Lisān al-'Arab* dictionary offers one such rare example of “mother” used as a verb, stating:

وَأُمَّتْ تَوُّمٌ أُمُومَةٌ: صَارَتْ أُمًّا

وقال ابن الأعرابي في امرأة ذكرها: كانت لها عمة تَوُّمها أي تكون لها كالأم

The above lines can be translated as follows: “ammat, ta'umm, umūmah, meaning she became a mother/she mothers/mothering. And Ibn al-Arābī mentioned a woman, saying: “She had an aunt *ta'ummuba*, meaning who mothers her/was like a mother to her” (my translation; *Lisān al-'Arab* 575).

However, in English, “mother” naturally serves as both noun and verb: a mother; to mother—a fluid duality. Singh writes about words and how they carry “histories that require attentiveness and sensitivity” (147), and in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmerer tells us, “Language is the dwelling place of ideas that do not exist anywhere else. It is a prism through which to see the world” (258). bell hooks also writes on words and language: “We are rooted in language, wedded, have our beings in words” (28).

In her article “The Word ‘Mother’ Is a Verb,” Julietta Brennock writes:

“Mother” is a verb. Mother is holding his head over the toilet while he throws up too much Halloween candy. Mother is picking her up from the principal’s office after she made disrespectful comments to her teacher while standing up for herself. Mother is taking away his phone when his grades fell below Cs and standing tall as he slams the bedroom door in your face. Mother is putting her behind the wheel of your beloved car to teach her to drive and staying up with him all night when his heart is broken. “Mother” and “father” and “parent” are words of sustained care over time, not a moment of biological occurrence. It is knowing every detail of your person because you are doing the singular thing that is actually required to be a “real” parent: You are there. (223)

As a mother, an Arab, and a translator—and conscious of how language is situated in patriarchal and sociocultural histories—I find it ever more important to reengage and reactivate “mother” as a verb in Arabic. According to *Merriam-Webster*, verbs “show an action, occurrence, or state of being.” I suggest that using “mother” as a verb in Arabic reimagines and rethinks maternal roles as actively evolving, as action, and as lifelong service—an eternal contract and a position that requires that we are “always there” (Brennock 223), 24/7, 365 days a year. Today, I turn to “mother” in its verb form, in both languages, to describe and honour Selma’s actions in the last few

months as an act of mothering, for Selma indeed mothered me like a mother mothers her sick child.

As a schoolgirl in Arabic language classes, I was expected to recite a poem from start to finish just as I would memorize a surah from the Quran. A passage etched in my memory—sacred as scripture—comes from the work of Egyptian poet Hafiz Ibrahim (also known as the Poet of the People), where he writes: A mother is a school; if you prepare her, you prepare a nation of a strong foundation / A mother is a garden; if watered, she blossoms in the most splendid of blooms / A mother is the teacher of all teachers whose achievements are far-reaching into the horizons” (my translation; 282). Today, as I read these words through the lens of a mother, I am struck by how the poet’s use of nouns and adjectives—a school, a garden, a teacher—to depict mothers fails to evoke even one verb to speak of their actions. As I position myself as an Arab feminist-mothering-mother, and as I revisit the once-romanticized lines of the poet through a lens of feminist thinking, I cannot help but smell the stench of masculinity reeking from every word in the poet’s lines and feel the acuteness of an objectification of our roles as mothers—one that does not translate into subjects of action. I question and resist how words, language, poems, and histories have come to contribute to the patriarchal construction of an Arabic inventory on motherhood. Rethinking these cultural and linguistic frameworks from a feminist perspective reveals the entrenched patriarchy that shapes and limits the narrative around maternal roles.

On Being a Killjoy as Umm Selma

Revisiting a broader feminist framework, I find Sara Ahmed’s concept of the “feminist killjoy” especially relevant. It describes individuals who unsettle complacent social norms by challenging oppressive structures and voicing uncomfortable truths. In my role as an Arab mother, this “killjoy” identity manifested through resisting patriarchal expectations and insisting on my agency against entrenched gender hierarchies. These deeply rooted gender hierarchies are further perpetuated and reinforced through linguistic conventions, which not only reflect but also actively sustain patriarchal dominance. In Arabic, the word mother (in its noun form) is Umm (أم) and the word father is Ab (أب), and it is customary in many Arab countries to call parents fathers or mothers of their firstborn son, not daughter. Many times, this nickname comes to replace the parent’s name socially among family and friends. However, in my case, my firstborn was a daughter, Selma. This presented a dilemma: Selma was not a firstborn son, and to my surprise, my husband’s name became Abu (father of) Aamer, and I automatically became Umm (mother of) Aamer, not Umm Selma, years before Aamer was born.

Indeed, the nickname Abu Aamer was assigned to my husband ever since his teenage years, and I, as his wife, then became Umm Aamer. Aside from the problem of my son's name having been decided by some random guy years before I gave birth to him, I was appalled at the notion of dismissing and diminishing my daughter's place in a hierarchy that values a male son, accords him a place of domination, and privileges him in societal structures before even having taken his first breath of life—a sociocultural hierarchy that shapes and positions a female body and her presence in the world, society, and family as second in line to the male figure in her life, be it her father, brother, or husband.

This is a hierarchy of institutional structures that “impose values, modes of thought, ways of being on our consciousness” (hooks 37)—a hierarchy of gendered power allocations where, as explained by Fatima Mernissi, the issue with Muslim (and I add and/or Arab) societies “is not an ideology of female inferiority, but rather a set of laws and customs that ensure that women's status remains one of subjugation” (11). She adds:

Paradoxically, and contrary to what is commonly assumed, Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes. The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely, segregation and legal subordination in the family structure. (19)

This hierarchy, as Ahmed puts it in her “A Killjoy Manifesto,” embodies “the violence of a patriarchal order” (251).

As a new mother in 1998, this was my first encounter with a patriarchally constructed motherhood, and it made me sick, as Ahmed might say. However, I have also learned from Ahmed that it is “our rage [that] becomes our sickness. We vomit; we vomit out what we have been asked to take in. Our guts become our feminist friends the more we are sickened. We begin to feel the weight of histories more and more” (255). In retrospect, that was when I had unknowingly stepped into the role of a “feminist killjoy”; it was my moment of “coming to voice—on moving from silence into speech as revolutionary gesture,” the beginning of my “self-transformation” when I was “transformed in consciousness and being” (hooks 12, 15). It was the first time that I heard my voice.

Andrea O'Reilly emphasizes the importance of matricentric feminism, which focusses on empowering mothering and directly challenging the oppressive nature of patriarchal motherhood and its construction. She maintains, “I have sought to do feminism as a mother and do mothering as a feminist” (26). In an attempt to follow in O'Reilly's footsteps and disrupt a

patriarchal system as a feminist-mothering-mother—to reject violations, decentre the patriarch, the male, and the masculine, and break away from the “capture of normativity” (Singh 46)—I decided to demand that I be called Umm Selma.

I also refused to give my daughter her father’s first name as her middle name—another tradition practiced in some Arab countries that emphasizes centring a daughter’s gender identity around the patriarchal and the masculine. Instead, on my daughter’s passport, her name reads today as Selma Alatrash Janbey, where my last name became her middle name. My sons’ names read as Aamer Alatrash Janbey and Marcel Alatrash Janbey. These happen to be some of the most triumphant moments I lived in life as a feminist killjoy, wherein a feminist killjoy refers to those who feel discomfort with the status quo in society and “speak up” and “speak back” in the face of racism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression while actively refusing to conform to societal expectations that hold inequality (Ahmed 260). This is how I was living a feminist life. Feminism becomes praxis. As Ahmed says, “We enact the world we are aiming for. Nothing less will do” (255).

On March 4, 1998, I became Umm Selma, a crown I wear on my head, as we say in Arabic, and it was also then that I became a warrior in a campaign against patriarchal and gendered hierarchical sociocultural constructions and institutions. Today, I engage mothering as an “unabashedly” (Singh 74) political act, where parenting becomes “an act of radical pedagogy” (63) and where my beliefs have become my “living politics” (57). As Singh resolves: “There was no maternal without the political, no way of being a mother that didn’t involve an urgent and planetary pedagogy. To be a mother meant to diagnose wounds and figure out how to mend them. There was little difference whether these wounds were to be found on individual bodies or within the body politic” (86). This is a life I will continue to live as a feminist-mothering-mother activist, where feminism is “a liberation struggle” (hooks 22), and mothering is an honour and a learning journey that would not have been lived had it not been for Selma and had I not become Umm Selma.



“The Yamma_Rabba”

Conclusion

Reflecting on the intersections of motherhood, identity, and feminism through my journey reveals profound truths about resilience, care, and agency. The loss of a breast has catalyzed a redefinition of my identity—not just as a mother but as a woman navigating the complexities of societal expectations and personal growth. My relationship with Selma embodies the cyclical and transformative power of caregiving, challenging conventional hierarchies and asserting the radical interdependence central to feminist values.

The limitations of language further illustrate the entrenched patriarchal norms that constrain maternal roles. Yet these constraints provide an opportunity to challenge and reimagine what it means to mother—both as a verb and as a transformative act of love and resistance. Through the writing of this article-diary, I have come to find a space where the personal becomes political and where the acts of care, naming, and resistance form a profound declaration of agency. Rather than a mere reflection on loss, this diary is also a celebration of the resilience inherent in reclaiming one's body, voice, and identity against the forces of patriarchal constraint. Ultimately, my experience speaks not just to one mother's resilience or one daughter's but to the potential for every act of mothering to unravel patriarchal scripts. In reclaiming language and redefining motherhood, we imagine new possibilities for future generations—possibilities anchored in reciprocity, agency, and embodied love. In living as Umm Selma, I carry forward a legacy of resistance and transformation.

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Preterm Premature Rupture of the Membranes (PPROM), Pregnancy Loss, and the Choice of Motherhood

Preterm premature rupture of the membranes (or preterm prelabour rupture of the membranes, PPROM) refers to the amniotic sac breakage of a pregnant woman before the gestational week of thirty–seven. It serves as the major cause of fetal and neonatal complications despite recent medical advances. This article argues that PPROM, which has almost exclusively been discussed in the medical community, should be examined as an important topic of reproductive justice and motherhood studies. In doing so, it reveals that PPROM has been overlooked in feminist conversations because of its marginalized status at the intersection of class and race, the lack of reliable resources, the successful birth of a child as the social norm, and the possible affirmation of fetal personhood if loss is involved. This article argues for the concept of “relational choice” to process PPROM-affected women’s experience of loss beyond the limited boundary of fetal viability. Based on the considerations to validate women’s experience of pregnancy loss, the “relational choice” perspective combines choice feminism, which enables pregnant women to take a stance through ambiguous boundaries, with relational autonomy, which acknowledges the multiple ways social forces influence individual agency. The relational choice model offers a way for women to interpret the unique meaning of pregnancy loss to each woman and choose to recognize themselves as mothers while they challenge the various social issues around PPROM and pregnancy loss. Overall, this article advocates for women’s agency during and after pregnancy and the active inclusion of PPROM within feminist discourses.

PPROM (preterm premature rupture of the membranes in the United States [US] or preterm prelabour rupture of the membranes in the United Kingdom and Canada) refers to the symptom of a pregnant body’s amniotic sac breaking and leaking fluid prematurely before the gestational age of thirty–seven weeks.

Although PPRM complicates about 30 to 40 per cent of preterm births in the US (Feduniw et al.), PPRM discussions are almost exclusively produced in the medical community.

Advances in the medical sciences have greatly increased the survival rates of infants affected by PPRM for the past few decades. However, many preterm births caused by PPRM still result in a negative prognosis; it is a major contributor to perinatal morbidity and mortality (Borna et al). Perinatal mortality, largely defined as fetal demise during the gestational weeks of twenty to twenty-eight or infant death that occurs around seven to twenty-eight days (Barfield et al.), blurs the notion of fetal viability when PPRM causes it. Although fetal viability as a legal concept was an important point of consideration to construct a time frame for *Roe v. Wade*, the US Supreme Court deliberately does not specify a certain gestational week for fetal viability; viability is a matter of medical judgment (Romanis). It is generally assumed that a fetus can be viable from twenty-three to twenty-four weeks with contemporary medical intervention. However, medical studies still show varied results of PPRM-affected fetus survival around twenty-two to twenty-four weeks (Lorthe et al.; González-Mesa et al.; Qattee et al.), demonstrating that fetal viability is a fluid concept further complicated by PPRM.

Moreover, PPRM significantly affects pregnant women's perception of motherhood. Sarah Earle et al. point out that most pregnancy discourses focus on positive outcomes and rarely acknowledge losses (259). Since many preterm births caused by PPRM result in perinatal morbidity or mortality, pregnant women who experience PPRM are isolated from these dominant discourses. When pregnancy loss is involved, the uncertainty of fetal viability at the time of delivery confuses them in processing their experience. Understanding the pregnancy loss as the loss of a viable fetus—a baby loss—without careful consideration risks affirming the antiabortion rhetoric of fetal personhood. However, accepting the loss of a nonviable fetus—a nonloss, as there was no baby—not only detaches pregnant women from their lived experience but reiterates the common medical and social response of brushing the experience off and saying, “Never mind—better luck next time” (Letherby 165). Lost in these two options, pregnant women who are diagnosed with PPRM and experience pregnancy loss are marked as the other in m/others or simply as nonmothers.

Based on this context and my personal experience, I argue that PPRM is an important issue of reproductive justice and motherhood studies and reveal that PPRM is situated at the intersection of gender, class, and race. From a feminist perspective, I also reclaim the rhetoric of choice within the context of choice feminism and relational autonomy and argue for the concept of “relational choice” to validate pregnant women's experience of PPRM and

their perception of motherhood. In doing so, I share my own experience of PPRM and the subsequent pregnancy loss as an example and evidence to my argument. Studies on motherhood and pregnancy loss are often inseparable from the researchers' firsthand experience; in this sense, sharing one's personal experience can serve as a political act of speaking up and making the underexplored topic of PPRM visible.

The Marginalization of PPRM and PPRM-Affected Women's Experience

PPROM covers various issues in reproductive justice and motherhood studies. When pregnant women experience PPRM, considering their gestational week and the physical and physiological conditions, medical professionals suggest termination of pregnancy or expectant management (i.e., the close monitoring of a patient's condition without treatment until symptoms change) that involves bed rest. Sometimes, women request expectant management even though their medical team suggests abortion; if they cannot afford to stay in the hospital for a prolonged period, they are advised to pursue expectant management at home. PPRM, as such, encompasses issues in the definition of fetal viability, the right to continue or terminate pregnancy, miscarriage, stillbirth (pregnancy loss after twenty to twenty-eight gestational weeks), access to healthcare, and the emotional wellbeing of pregnant women during and after their pregnancy.

Nevertheless, PPRM is almost entirely discussed in the medical domain, except for a few private awareness organizations and social media pages founded by those who experienced PPRM. One main reason for this underexplored area comes from its rarity. Multiple medical sources indicate that PPRM complicates about 1 to 3 per cent of pregnancies in the US (about 150,000 pregnancies each year) and that it occurs more frequently among African Americans and people of low socioeconomic status, as well as among people in developing countries (Jazayeri; Dayal and Hong; Abebe et al.). These studies particularly demonstrate that the environmental conditions—that is, a matter of social status—in which pregnant women live are an important factor of PPRM. At the same time, they also demonstrate that most PPRM-affected women are marginalized by social class and race in addition to gender. It is common knowledge that most clinical research in the West is conducted for and around white middle-class males and that even in maternity care, more patients of colour report discrimination or mistreatment than their white counterparts (Jacewicz; Mohamoud et al.). PPRM, then, is isolated from the major discourses in reproductive justice and motherhood studies not only because it is a rare condition but also because it is a marginal issue at the intersection of class and race.

The marginalization of PPRM is problematic as PPRM-affected women can easily be confused regarding their treatment plans. The internet has made many online resources available for different health conditions, including PPRM, but these sources vary widely in terms of accuracy, quality, readability, and credibility. Indeed, in a 2023 study, Megan Hall et al. analyze information on PPRM online and reveal that most online resources discussing PPRM are either inaccurate or inaccessible to most readers (1300). Even in the case of medical journal articles that are fairly accessible to college-educated nonprofessional readers, the results of these articles vary because of the nature of clinical research and thus further confuse the readers to discern which study they may refer to for their situations. The lack of credible and accessible information on PPRM hinders pregnant women from making informed decisions in seeking suitable post-PPRM treatments, eventually rendering them feeling lost and isolated.

I had PPRM at the gestational week of twenty-one and lost all my amniotic fluid. When I was admitted to the hospital, my obstetricians (OB) told me that they would not take any action because I would deliver in two days. When I did not go into labour after two days, both my OB and maternal-fetal medicine (MFM) teams suggested an abortion because the fetus would have no chance to survive outside the womb at twenty-one weeks. I thought about the time when I lost a significant amount of amniotic fluid in week fourteen. My doctors did not discuss PPRM back then, although in retrospect, it could have been the first sign of PPRM, according to one of my MFM doctors. No matter what it was, there was just enough water, and the fetus was fine. I was discharged from the emergency room that day. I hopefully believed the same thing could happen: It was fine at week fourteen, so it could be fine this time, too. However, my medical team did not tell me of an alternative to an abortion. I desperately sought a second opinion, talking to a family member who was a medical professional from another hospital and reading about other PPRM cases on social media with positive outcomes (newborns with fairly treatable health conditions), and based on the information I acquired from these sources, I demanded antibiotic treatment and expectant management. I did not request these based on the belief that I had full control over my body—what Linda L. Layne would call a “side effect” of the women’s health movement, an idea I will explain below. I was hopeful but realistic as well, and I knew I could control only a few things. I just thought that even if the fetus would have to go eventually, I should have the right to request some medical attention from my doctors to prolong my pregnancy and see what could happen. At least I was fortunate to have an insurance plan that would cover most of the expenses for what was going to be a long hospital stay.

During the four weeks of my bed rest, one of the MFM doctors gave me a copy of a medical journal article about the negative prognosis of periviable

PPROM (between twenty-two and twenty-six weeks of gestation) and encouraged me to read more about it. I found more journal articles about PPROM online and kept reading them, but they often seemed to be irrelevant to a common reader like me. Some articles were published decades ago, and many articles were based on international research. I was not able to tell what articles would best explain my situation. I felt isolated and marginalized in my hospital room, listening to the newborns crying outside in the Labour and Delivery Department, just like when Layne remembers her miscarriage: “I remember thinking at the time that it wasn’t fair that the women who got the babies were also those who got all the support and attention” (“Breaking the Silence” 293). I was told that my OB and MFM teams had different opinions about administering more antibiotics to me. When the fetus showed intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR) at twenty-four weeks, they also had different opinions over fetal heart monitoring: My OB doctors wanted to avoid an unnecessary cesarean section to minimize the harm to my pregnant body, whereas the MFM team wanted to take any necessary measures for the fetus in the slim chance it survives. I was lost between these two opinions, with no reliable resources to help me understand the situation more clearly. In the meantime, the fetus’s heart eventually stopped at week twenty-five, and I was induced. As my nurses put it, the decision was made by the fetus while I was lost and unable to make an informed decision for my own body.

When I came home from the hospital, no one mentioned the pregnancy loss to me. I tried to take it as a thoughtful gesture to give me enough time to process, but I found it disappointing when my family looked noticeably uncomfortable talking about my pregnancy loss. Some outright told me to stop thinking about the loss and move on. Most of my colleagues and other people around me acted as if nothing had happened. When I saw my OB doctors after a few weeks, they reassured me the fetus had no chance of living even with an emergency cesarean section and that I should focus on recovering and trying again. The more I was silenced, however, the more I wanted to share my experience. I decided to share my experience with some of my friends, and when I did, a surprising number of them shared various experiences of pregnancy loss.

Another reason for the marginalization of PPROM comes from the stigma attached to pregnancy loss. Many narratives of pregnancy loss explore pregnant women’s experience of loss being made taboo and silenced, although they later realize the commonness of their experience. Masha Sukovic and Margie Serrato explain that their miscarriages were “akin to experiencing a stigmatized illness” (21). They later shared their experience and learned that many people had similar experiences; they had to go through a long time of feeling shameful and guilty because “uncomplicated fertility and natural motherhood are not just expected but taken for granted, and are often perceived as the norm rather

than the fortunate exception” (25). Pregnancy loss as a stigmatized illness demonstrates once again that only the successful delivery of a healthy child is considered as the dominant view in pregnancy discourses. Layne argues this dominant discourse is rooted in the culture of meritocracy that promotes individual control. According to Layne, although biomedical obstetrics and the women’s health movement since the 1960s have brought about significant medical advances and self-awareness of the female body, they also created the idea that pregnancy and childbirth are something pregnant women can control when most issues in pregnancy and pregnancy complications are uncontrollable. This idea, in turn, portrays successful childbirth as the norm, a “natural womanly talent” (“Unhappy Endings” 1888–89). More problematically, it reinforces the neoliberal rhetoric that individual control is a self-conscious and neutral decision unaffected by any surrounding influences. This neoliberal rhetoric is even more problematic in the case of PPRM, since it disproportionately affects people of colour with lower socioeconomic status.

What is equally problematic is that the emotions of pregnant women experiencing pregnancy loss are not properly addressed or acknowledged. In the medical professionals’ eyes, most pregnancy losses are relatively unimportant medical events, as they are natural reactions of the body and are not evidence of any pathological issues (Layne, “Breaking the Silence” 292). That is, these women at the risk of pregnancy loss are not sick—they will be physically fine once the fetus is removed. They are neither patients nor mothers to these professionals, and with the stigma of pregnancy loss, their emotions are largely ignored by the people around them. In the case of early miscarriage, the social lack of awareness of its emotional aspect is even more serious because the fetus is not pronounced. Marie Allen and Shelly Marks explain that there used to be a clear distinction between miscarriage as the “loss of a dream” and stillbirth as the “death of a baby,” at least until the 1980s (3). In a more recent narrative, Nancy Gerber recollects a similarly frustrating experience of being told that miscarriage is not the loss of a baby—it is the “loss of a nameless, formless mass that would never grow into a living being” (49). Regardless of what trimester the loss has occurred, however, the once-pregnant women who lost their pregnancy are collectively put in an ambiguous space of motherhood and deemed a nonmother or the other in m/others because the once-expected child is not present. As such, pregnant women who experience PPRM and the subsequent pregnancy loss are multiplicatively marginalized by the intersection of class, race, and gender, the lack of reliable resources, the stigmatized feelings they have lost control over their bodies, and the surrounding environment in which their emotions are not validated or welcome to be shared.

The Choice of Motherhood for PPRM-Affected Women Who Experience Pregnancy Loss

The real emotional struggle and confusion did not come from sharing my experience with others; they came from interpreting the experience for myself. I went through the same frustrating course of processing my experience as many other feminists did. Just like Kate Parsons, I used to draw strict and clear lines among an embryo, a fetus, and a baby. An embryo and a fetus are not viable, and a fetus should only be recognized as a baby outside the womb, breathing and crying. I even called my embryo the “lump of cells” in the first trimester because the embryo at that point was exactly what it was—a lump of cells. Now, my pregnancy loss has complicated my beliefs and practices. If it was not something of value (an actual baby), what did I lose? Why am I grieving? The fetus I had passed at the gestational week of twenty-five, when it was supposed to be viable. Can I grieve the loss, then, because it was viable? However, the fetus was nonviable because it was having IUGR after my PPRM. Should I not grieve its loss because it was nonviable? Had I had an abortion following my doctors’ suggestion, would I not have been allowed to grieve my loss because I decided to terminate my pregnancy? Does this mean that those who had an abortion cannot grieve their loss because they chose to terminate their pregnancy for whatever reason? Does this mean that only those who had a stillbirth at the point of “clear” fetal viability—if there is such a thing, since the fetus’s heart can stop at any point—can grieve? This section examines the problems of grieving and accepting motherhood in the case of PPRM-related pregnancy loss and finds an answer to these questions in the model of relational choice.

Layne argues that feminists have carefully disregarded discussions on pregnancy loss: “Because anti-abortion activists base their argument on the presence of fetal, and even more important, embryonic personhood, feminists have studiously avoided anything that might imply or concede such a presence” (*Motherhood Lost* 240). That is, the idea of fetal viability, which largely overlaps with the issues in pregnancy loss, has been deliberately silenced in feminist discourses because it risks being oversimplified as “fetal personhood” and then “life” in the moral and religious senses by antiabortionists—although in reality, as explained above, fetal viability is a fluid and ambiguous concept both in legal and medical domains. Nevertheless, Layne explains that an anthropologically informed view of cultural personhood can reconsider embryonic/fetal personhood beyond the antiabortionist view. According to Layne’s model of cultural personhood, pregnant women can establish a social relationship with a desired child during their pregnancy. This model also explains the processing of loss from nonembryonic pregnancies, such as anembryonic pregnancy (i.e., a fertilized egg not developing into an embryo)

and molar pregnancy (i.e., the formation of tumours in the uterus) because a protoperson has been expected and can be mourned even if an embryo has never existed in the first place (*Motherhood Lost* 240).

Developing Layne's idea further and briefly drawing upon French feminists and posthumanism, Parsons suggests a relational model in processing pregnancy loss. The relational model of pregnancy loss is based on the premise that personhood is not an abstract and absolute concept but a social category (12). According to Parsons, pregnant women are interrelated to their embryos and fetuses on a physical level while they are separable at the same time, and this interrelatability and severability enables individual women to give meaning to their relationships to their embryos and fetuses. When pregnant women lose their pregnancy, the loss serves as an emotionally significant event as they lose both their embryonic/fetal tissue and other parts of their bodies (such as blood and tissue) as "developing beings" together (12–15). Although Parsons takes a reserved approach not to use the term "baby" to refer to the lost embryos and fetuses, her relational model offers another tool for pregnant women to acknowledge their different emotions resulting from pregnancy loss as they interpret their experience.

Building upon these two models, I borrow the rhetoric of choice and reclaim it as an effective way to process pregnancy loss, especially when PPRM is involved. To be more specific, I situate the word within the contexts of choice feminism and relational autonomy to develop my idea of "relational choice" and argue that it is up to the pregnant women to choose how to make sense of their experiences of loss. As Layne discusses, the topic of pregnancy loss has been avoided in US feminist discourses because of the choice vs. life dichotomy generated and intensified after *Roe v. Wade*. Scholars have noted that the word "choice" in this framework is highly influential for activism (i.e., "My body, my choice"), but it problematically carries the negative connotations of "individual decision" in the neoliberal sense; in fact, I have argued in my previous work that feminists should move beyond the rhetoric of choice and see the overarching biopolitical ideology regulating the female body. Nevertheless, years later, in this article, I argue that the word "choice" still holds powerful meaning, as the rhetoric is easy to use and understand in interpreting pregnancy loss; now that *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned, I also believe reclaiming choice for the discussion of pregnancy loss is imperative.

"Choice feminism" is a term coined by Linda Hirshman in 2006. Embracing self-determination and respecting individual women's choices, the term celebrates individualism as a source of empowerment. Scholars have criticized it for being a form of neoliberal feminism—that is, it does not take the social, economic, and cultural structures that affect individual women into account and reduces these forces into individual concerns (Budgeon 304). However, Claire Snyder-Hall argues in support of choice feminism that it can be an

important tool to “determine [individual women’s] own path through contradictory discourses” among diverse and intersectional identities or experiences (259). In other words, choice feminism’s commitment to pluralism welcomes all women’s choices specifically placed within ambiguous or contradictory boundaries. In the context of processing PPRM-affected pregnancy loss, choice feminism opens up the possibility for all women to choose what their loss or lost embryo and fetus means to each woman without accepting fetal personhood as life, particularly because the boundary between the pregnant woman and the fetus is fluid and the concept of fetal viability is ambiguous.

Additionally, choice feminism combined with the feminist philosophy of relational autonomy can effectively separate itself from the neoliberal rhetoric of choice. Catriona Mackenzie defines relational autonomy as a perspective that understands autonomy “through the lens of feminist work on social groups and social oppression” and “brings into focus the importance of developing concepts of autonomy that are sensitive to considerations of social justice” (146). Fully examining the various means that social forces influence individual agency, relational autonomy differs from the neoliberal model of the “maximal choice conception of autonomy” that promotes consumer sovereignty and noninterference from the state entities (146). Relational autonomy considers autonomy as both status (i.e., exercising self-determining authority over their lives) and capacity (i.e., making decisions and acting based on one’s values) (147); in the context of pregnancy loss, autonomy as status explains the women’s right to understand what their pregnancy loss means to them without being affected by outside influences, whereas autonomy as capacity explains their right to accept, express, and share their emotions with others if they choose to do so. Mackenzie further elucidates that relational autonomy “[draws] attention to ... a wide range of emotional, imaginative and critically reflective skills, such as capacities to interpret and regulate one’s own emotions, to imaginatively envisage alternative ways of acting, and to challenge social norms and values” (149). In other words, women can choose to process their emotions and the meaning of their loss in the manner that is suitable for them while they can also criticize the stigma of pregnancy loss. The pregnant women who experience PPRM and the subsequent pregnancy loss can likewise recognize the ways that PPRM is marginalized and their loss is silenced as important issues in feminist discourses.

Compared to Layne’s cultural personhood that centres upon the formation of a social relationship with the embryo and fetus as the once-expected child and Parsons’s relational pregnancy loss that revolves around the personal relationship between the pregnant women and the embryo and fetus during and after the pregnancy, the model of relational choice focusses on the women’s agency and their active interpretation of what to make of their pregnancy loss while they recognize and even challenge social conventions and systems. The

individual meaning of what these women have lost from their pregnancy does not need to align with the blurry definitions of fetal viability in the legal, medical, moral, or religious senses. Relational choice also significantly refuses the hierarchy between miscarriage and stillbirth and embraces the women's right to grieve after an abortion. Whether the loss was from a miscarriage or a stillbirth, whether an embryo existed or not, or whether the loss was caused by an abortion or a miscarriage, the experience of loss is unique to each woman. These women define what the loss was—if they have lost a “lump of cells” or a baby, or if they wanted to lose it in the first place or not—and they may perceive themselves as mothers if they choose to do so.

As the “lump of cells” embryonic stage was over, my partner and I started to think about a nickname for the fetus. It was not meant to be a real name but a fetal nickname. Giving the fetus a nickname has become a popular custom in South Korea since the new millennium. Although Hui-suk Kang argues that fetal nicknaming demonstrates Korean people's perception of fetus as lives with personality (33), the fact that fetal nicknames are informal and almost always never resemble real human names was a more interesting and appealing point to me; fetal nicknaming seemed to me that instead of accepting fetal “life,” Korean people would rather ambiguously recognize the fetus as something that was not a human being yet but could develop into one after a while. We decided to call the fetus “Huckleberry” after our summer trip to Montana.

When I was admitted to the hospital, I thought if Huckleberry could survive PPROM, I would name him Phoenix. He did not survive, however, and was recorded as “Huckleberry” on his death certificate. I learned later that issuing death certificates in the case of stillbirth was a relatively new practice in the US and that there was no proof of the loss given to the once-pregnant women before (Cacciatore and Bushfield 379); it was as if these women were coerced into believing that nothing had happened. After I decided to write about PPROM, I learned more frustrating facts in the process of research. For one thing, there is a higher risk of recurrence after the first PPROM (Heyden et al.). For another, pregnant women who experience loss from PPROM and other complications suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, including avoidance, hyperarousal, and fear of reexperiencing the complications (Stramrood et al.; Schwerdtfeger and Shreffler). The PTSD related to pregnancy loss is often resolved after the birth of a healthy baby (Turton et al.); if these women remain involuntarily childless after their loss, it is reported that they can suffer from PTSD for a prolonged period of seven years (Schwerdtfeger and Shreffler). Nevertheless, on a more positive note, I also learned that the legal community had been working to expand on the meaning of reproductive justice-based rights to include miscarriage and stillbirth and protect pregnant women's rights to appropriate prenatal

preventive care, the choice of treatment options, and the claim of motherhood in the case of loss (Lens 1059).

These studies reflect my own experience, as I was afraid of getting pregnant again for fear of experiencing another PPRM. I had never realized just how many television commercials painfully portrayed normal or normative pregnancy and childbirth before I experienced PPRM. I even had to change the channel whenever a sick child was shown on television for a while. It took a time of deliberation and consideration until I decided to take Huckleberry as my baby, my first son. I have not yet dared to look at the reminders of Huckleberry—the blanket that had covered him right after he was taken out of my body and his death certificate—even after two years, but it does not matter as I have already decided how I should interpret my loss. Whether I have physical reminders or not, whether my family and friends acknowledge Huckleberry as my baby or not, I can choose to remember him as my baby and myself as his mother. It is not because Huckleberry was viable in the legal and medical senses or because his was a life in the moral and religious senses, but because he is our first son to my partner and me.

Conclusion

About a month before this article was accepted by the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, I gave birth to a healthy baby without having another PPRM. My pregnancy loss-related concerns, which I had for the whole period of pregnancy, have largely been resolved with this delivery; the aftermath of PPRM as I experience it, however, is more long-lasting than what studies suggest. The problematic normativity of many television commercials in which heterosexual couples easily establish nuclear families still stands out to me; I now process news of disasters and untimely deaths with more difficulty than before. Ironically, it is the act of remembering the commonness of pregnancy loss—knowing that the loss is as natural as childbirth and that I am not alone on this issue—that has significantly relieved my anxiety over another pregnancy and general uncertainty in life. To properly address and acknowledge women's experiences of PPRM and pregnancy loss-related PTSD, more social awareness of pregnancy complications as common incidents and the changes in the perception of pregnancy loss are essential.

PPROM is indeed more commonly felt than what the incidence rate may indicate. Two weeks into my hospitalization, another patient was admitted to the Labour and Delivery Department with symptoms of second trimester PPRM, just like me. She was also of South Korean descent. I tried to connect with her, but she and I were never able to meet as I was discharged two weeks later. Although PPRM only complicates about 1 to 3 per cent of pregnancies in the US each year, that is 150,000 pregnant women. Based on

where I live, New Jersey (the most densely populated state in the US), that number is as big as its third most populated city in 2023. It is not just a coincidence to have another patient with PPROM in the same hospital. Ultimately, my lived experience reiterates why it is crucial to consider PPROM as an important issue of reproductive justice and motherhood studies and to advocate for women's relational choice in processing their pregnancy loss: these 150,000 women in the US should not feel isolated or marginalized anymore.

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Refugee Motherhood and Mothering: Adversities, Resilience, and Agency

Through using intersectionality as a critical framework, this article focuses on refugee mothers' challenges, resilience, and agency within the context of forced migration from Southeast Asia to Canada. It explores the unique context of Karen refugee mothers who were relocated to Canada following their initial displacement from their villages in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) to various refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border and asks the following question: How do Karen refugee mothers deal with adversities in the resettlement process, and do they regard their gendered roles positively or negatively? I conducted qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten first-generation Karen refugee women residing in London, Southwestern Ontario. The interviews investigate how refugee mothers feel about their gender roles regarding motherhood, mothering, and responsibilities and how they renegotiate gender roles and remake mothering practices while dealing with problems in the settlement process. My study aims to fill the knowledge gap about minority refugee mothers' resettlement narratives in a culturally grounded family context. Based on the findings, I argue that it is not possible to fully understand women's agencies in the context of forced migration without looking at their stressors and other aspects of intersecting identities, such as mothers, othermothers, gender roles, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class.

Introduction

In the 1980s, scholars highlighted women's active participation in migration and focussed on how women's immigration affects families, the family division of labour, and gender roles. Regardless of women's identification as immigrants or refugees, studies show that their migration experiences are shaped by gender roles, and it is crucial to scrutinize how migration influences their roles as mothers (Bouris et al.; Curry Rodriguez; Glenn et al.; Ortiz Maddali;

McKinnon; Valenzuela). This is because, as Julia Curry Rodriguez argues, mothering is a relationship and action in which the biological mother has physical contact and fulfills a caring relation, situated in the original, natural, or existing position (214). Moreover, refugee mothers may face numerous and interconnected challenges as they navigate life in new and often hostile environments. Consequently, these challenges can affect their ability to provide for their families and integrate into new societies, as well as access legal support, economic opportunities, healthcare, education, and social services, which are essential for their wellbeing and successful resettlement.

Through using intersectionality as a critical framework, this article focuses on refugee mothers' challenges, resilience, and agency within the context of forced migration from Southeast Asia to Canada. I specifically explore the unique context of Karen refugee mothers, who were relocated to London, Ontario, following their initial displacement from their villages in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) to various refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border for over two to three decades. This article investigates how Karen refugee mothers deal with adversities in the resettlement process and whether they regard their gendered roles positively or negatively. The intersectionality theory emphasizes the significance of women's lived experiences and the issues of intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality, arguing that women's experiences can be empowering to them (Crenshaw; Collins). I also engage with other feminist scholars who examine family stories of forced migration from war zones and relevant peer-reviewed articles. Regarding my primary data collection, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten first-generation Karen refugee women in person.

The study involved first-generation Karen refugee women aged twenty-five and older who were relocated to Canada under the government-assisted refugee program; they were married or had common-law marital status and lived with immediate family members. Interviews did not include recently arrived Karen refugee women still navigating settlement procedures. A sampling of research subjects was achieved by using convenience and snowball techniques (Bryman and Bell 245) to capture a wide range of Karen refugee women, including a Karen community leader and young women activists. The sample consisted of people between the ages of twenty-seven and fifty-five, and they had been in Canada between six years and twenty years. Out of ten participants, four women became mothers in Canada (i.e., their children were born there). A bilingual interview assistant was hired to record and transcribe Karen narratives into English. Seven participants answered the questions in English, while three answered in Karen. York University's Office of Research Ethics granted ethical approval, and I have replaced the participants' names with pseudonyms.

The interview questions were structured into two parts. The first part focussed on demographics and background information, and the second included semi-structured questions, focussing on specific themes like family-related stressors, relocation challenges, and coping strategies related to gender roles and responsibilities. Based on the findings, I argue that it is not possible to fully understand women's agency in the context of forced migration without looking at their stressors and other aspects of intersecting identities, such as mothers, othermothers, gender roles, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class. Moreover, helping refugee mothers, especially those from protracted refugee situations, requires services that are sensitive to their culture and an approach that looks at all aspects of the problem, focussing on family-centred solutions. To this end, this article suggests family-oriented solutions to make English as a second language (ESL) classes more accessible, effective, and efficient for refugee mothers.

Background of the Karen People

During the British colonization of Myanmar in the nineteenth century, Karen people were recruited for police and armed forces and fought for British allies during WWII to gain their autonomy. However, when Britain granted independence to Myanmar in 1948, the Karen were forced to join the Union of Burma. A Karen insurgency gained momentum over the years but was fought off by government troops, and the Burmese military eventually took power in 1962. A consistent pattern of deliberate human rights violations by the Burmese military forces drove tens of thousands of Karen to Thailand as refugees, making the Karen conflict one of the world's longest rebellions.

Since the Thai government is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees from Burma are treated as undocumented immigrants and confined to camps, leading to protracted exile situations. Most refugees in Thailand are from the Karen ethnic group (79.1%), constituting one of Myanmar's eight major national-ethnic groups (Burrows 2). In 1995, the Burmese army launched major offensives against the Karen National Union (KNU) government-in-exile, forcing many Karen to flee. About 140,000 Karen refugees ended up in nine remote camps along the Thai-Burma border until the Thai government and the UNHCR reached an agreement in 2005 to resettle all of them (MacLaren et al. 64, 66). Between 2005 and 2007, the UNHCR arranged for fifty thousand Karen refugees to resettle in three countries: Australia, Canada, and the United States (Mantel 103). In 2005, 810 Karen refugees were accepted into Canada and in 2007, approximately two thousand more Karen refugees agreed to be brought (Government of Canada); 208 were resettled in London, Ontario, and the others in Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton (Erdogan17).

Theoretical Framework

Motherhood scholars use the term “patriarchal motherhood” to emphasize how patriarchy shapes motherhood as an institution to control women, reinforce gender inequality, and serve male-dominated power structures and institutional norms. For instance, Adrienne Rich provides two meanings of “motherhood”: the first is the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and her children; the second is the institution of mothering, which is important to social and political systems aiming to ensure that all women remain subject to male control (7). Rich’s theorization emphasizes that motherhood is a male-defined patriarchal institution that regulates women’s reproductive and domestic labour, perpetuates traditional gender roles, and profoundly oppresses women, thereby limiting their autonomy. However, Andrea O’Reilly defines “motherhood” as being male-defined, controlled, and deeply oppressive to women but “mothering” as female-defined, female-centred, and potentially empowering to women, thereby shedding light on two contradictory processes women experience. Moreover, O’Reilly posits that motherhood is not primarily a natural or biological function but a cultural practice that undergoes continuous redesign in response to shifting socioeconomic factors. She explicitly states that motherhood is a cultural construction whose meaning varies with time and place. Thus, there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood (“Matricentric Feminism”).

There is a clear distinction between the two processes and practices (i.e., motherhood and mothering), depending on the reality of patriarchal motherhood and given its existence not just across cultural differences but also via migration experiences (i.e., its meaning varies with time, place, and pattern of migration). Ideas about motherhood and mothering do not exist in a vacuum. How mothers conceptualize attitudes and expectations about their children and themselves, particularly migrant mothers, influences how they mother in new and challenging environments.

Exploring intersecting identities, such as race, gender, class, and socio-economic status, is crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant mothers.

In this regard, intersectionality, a framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, becomes a useful tool for analyzing how systems of oppression intersect and shape motherhood in diverse ways, examining how various social identities intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Particularly for migrant mothers, intersectionality offers a framework to comprehend the intricacies of their individual mothering experiences and the broader social structures that shape these experiences, whether their migration is voluntary or not. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins

explores the unique experiences of African American mothers, emphasizing intersectionality in understanding their experiences. She highlights the importance of considering the broader social structures shaping these experiences and contends that understanding Black mothers' experiences necessitates understanding the intersecting influences of race, gender, class, and other social categories in women's day-to-day lives. In many African American communities, mothering extends beyond the biological mother to include grandmothers, aunts, and other women who take on mothering roles. This collective approach to mothering is both a response to systemic challenges and a means of community survival and resilience. Black mothers often engage in resistance and activism as part of their mothering practices (187–98).

Collins highlights Black mothers' role in teaching children to navigate oppressive systems, economic challenges, cultural traditions, structural inequalities in the labour market, and welfare policies. She advocates for policies supporting Black motherhood, including equitable access to resources, childcare, healthcare, and education. Collins's work on Black motherhood and mothering underscores the complexities and strengths of Black maternal practices, thereby highlighting the resilience, agency, and collective strategies Black mothers use to resist systemic oppression (198–210). Collins's intersectional approach is particularly relevant as a theoretical framework for my research because it helps to understand the complex factors shaping refugee women's motherhood experiences and mothering practices in a resettled country. These refugee mothers' individual experiences can vary based on their unique combination of social identities, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity, and these identities do not exist independently but interact in complex ways that can amplify disadvantages or privileges. Moreover, by considering multiple identities and the interconnected systems of obstruction, I can examine how Karen refugee mothers demonstrate agency in their day-to-day lives despite facing numerous challenges and how their agency contributes to their resilience, adaptability, and proactive efforts to improve their situations and those of their families.

Findings and Discussion

Participants' Backgrounds

Among the ten Karen refugee women, seven stated they were Christians and three were Catholics (Catholics and other Christians share many beliefs but differ in their interpretation of the Bible, the role of church tradition, and the sacraments). All of them spent time in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border for several decades before relocating to Canada. Three participants were born in refugee camps, and their entire childhood was spent there until they resettled in London, Ontario. Six came to Canada as mothers, and four became mothers in Canada.

Most Troublesome Roles in the Settlement Process

When asked, “Do you have any specific role(s) or responsibilities that give you the most trouble in the settlement process?” all six women who migrated to Canada along with their children responded with the same answer: Being a mother and mothering their children in a new place caused the most stress and trouble during the settlement process. One mother who came to Canada without a child responded that not knowing to speak English caused her the most trouble, as well as using Google to search for places she needed to visit, especially the doctor’s. Interestingly, the responses from the remaining three individuals who migrated to Canada as children or youth with their parents were similar. They described how they unexpectedly took on multiple roles for other family members, such as interpreters, breadwinners, and caregivers, and how they adapted to their new environment much quicker than other older family members; they were also students in Canadian elementary and secondary schools.

Gender Roles

Another commonality among all participants was that all these refugee mothers practised coparenting with their spouses, even though some received childcare from other kinships, like grandparents and siblings. The participants identified specific physical and domestic tasks that their husbands performed as the “man of the house,” such as mowing the lawn, moving and repairing the furniture, maintaining the house, changing car tires, assisting with laundry and dishwashing, and disposing of garbage. The specific tasks that participants perceived they must perform due to their gender role as women of the house included domestic chores, such as laundry, cleaning, and cooking, as well as primary caregiving responsibilities, including bringing their children and parents to doctor appointments. No participants raised concerns with their spouses about sharing domestic chores or mothering responsibilities. These findings are consistent with my previous study, “Motherhood and Gender Role: A Study of Employed Myanmar Diasporic Mothers in the Greater Toronto Area” (published in 2024). However, all interview participants in that study came to Canada through other migration patterns, such as spouse/family sponsorship and live-in caregivers (May-Kyawt).

Perception of Gender Equality

When questioned about their perception of gender equality concerning their relationships with their spouses within the family context, all participants demonstrated a certain level of knowledge about gender equality such as “women and men are equal” and “no one is inferior,” citing the education they received in the refugee camps facilitated by the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO). During their stay in the camps, two participants (Aye Than and Gu

Ruru) volunteered as women leaders and teachers to protect children and adults from gender-based violence and child abuse. All participants stated that they enjoyed gender equality at home and had no concerns about it with their husbands, but they understood gender equality in their own cultural and traditional context.

Participants repeatedly emphasized the following examples of gender equality at home: supporting each other, being respectful, making decisions together, comothering, both working outside the home and sharing house chores, helping each other, sharing and caring, and not taking advantage of each other. Here is how some participants explained it:

I do enjoy gender equality in my home because my husband and I work together fifty-fifty. We made decisions together and supported each other. For example, before making any financial decisions, we talked about it together. (Nya Nya Say)

To me, gender equality is understanding each other and supporting each other. I am grateful that my partner is respectful and treats me as his equal. I do enjoy it because we made decisions together for our household and our children. There may be some adjustments, but at the end of the day, we make important decisions together. (Sai Roong)

Notably, one participant said that gender equality goes beyond mere equality, as a husband and wife may require additional assistance at some point. “I think gender equality goes beyond a simple fifty-fifty split; for me, it requires more to ensure a successful relationship, as there will be days when I am sick and need more [assistance]. There will be days when my husband is sick and needs more help” (Bee). Grace, who stopped working (after maternity leave) when she became a mother with two children (a two-and-a-half-year-old and a ten-month-old), had a different understanding of gender equality. Grace wanted to continue working, but she did not want to send her kids to daycare, so she decided to stop working until her children turned school age. While her husband went to work, she stopped working to fulfill her mothering responsibilities, and her decision supports her concept of “gender equality,” where the husband works, and the wife stays at home with the kids. She said: “Gender equality is important [when] someone [a husband] is working, somebody [a wife] just to take care of the kids for sure.”

Similarly, Nu Nu, who had stopped working with her two children (a seven-year-old and a one-year-old), expressed optimism that she would have more time to provide care for her children and her ailing father: “I am happy that I can stay home to take care of my two daughters, raise them, and have more time to teach them.... I am happy that I can take care of my dad and go to every hospital appointment.” Daymu, who was born in Karen State, Burma, and stayed in a refugee camp from the age of six to sixteen, has three children

(ages one, five, and six), and admitted that women have more opportunities to enjoy gender equality and freedom in Canada than in Burma. “Back home, men have more power over women, but here, we are all equal, and women have more opportunity and freedom.” In essence, the participants believed that being supportive, mutually respectful, codecision making, and sharing domestic work and childcare were the key elements of building positive gender relations in their day-to-day lives. The intersection of other aspects of their identity, such as forced migration, cultural background, the challenges they face in resettlement, and their interactions with Canadian society, contributed to a more nuanced perception of gender equality in the context of Karen refugee mothers. While they may have perceived progress and optimism in certain areas, such as gender roles and responsibilities within the family context, they often overlooked or downplayed ongoing challenges, such as racial discrimination and social inequality within the Canadian context. Moreover, maintaining more traditional gender norms in the Karen community context may put new generations under pressure to conform, hindering their ability to fully embrace or experience the gender equality that Canadian society promotes.

Karen Refugees: Motherhood

The findings suggest two factors influencing the subjective aspects of Karen refugee motherhood. First, as discussed in the previous section, Karen refugees’ perception of gender equality, coupled with the presence of caregiving support from their spouses, contributes to the fact that all participants do not view their motherhood as oppressive or discriminatory; they assume primary caregiver roles as “women of the house.” Second, their country’s cultural traditions and practices shape how Karen refugees perceive Karen motherhood, including the transmission of cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and community ties. Most participants believe that Karen women in Myanmar, the camps, and Canada practise a cultural tradition of staying at home with the children while performing domestic chores like cooking and cleaning. For instance, Grace explained: “I stay at home with the kids while he [husband] works, ensuring our [children’s] timely feeding.” Therefore, Grace decided to stop her employment until her children turned school age.

All the employed mothers in my sample claimed they prioritized their children when seeking jobs and choosing shifts. For instance, Sai Roong, who received caregiving help from her parents, considered two alternative options as a primary caregiver: “I have a child, and I make it my first priority. It can be a challenge to find a job that will fit into my schedule. I am a professional childcare provider, so I chose a job that allowed me to bring my child to work with me or find a schedule that works for me.” Another employed woman

whose children were already of school age tried to work different shifts to make sure one of the parents was available for morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up from the school: “My husband and I both work but we work opposite shifts. [When] I go back to work my husband works from 5:00 am to 1:00 pm shift, and then I do the evening shift. This is how we attempt to overcome (for caregiving)” (Bee).

Furthermore, these women continued to follow their cultural traditions in Canada, which included cooking and eating meals together, participating in family prayer at the church regularly, and performing prayer exchange services in someone’s home when necessary. O’Reilly argues that motherhood is a cultural construction; its meaning can vary with time and place (“Matricentric Feminism” 15–16). Karen refugee women define the meaning of motherhood by following their cultural traditions and their perception of gender equality; they choose to stay at home or go to work based on their economic needs and the availability of caregiving help, independent of male control, and they do not feel any oppression or negative emotions associated with motherhood. In other words, the intersecting influences of race, gender, class, and cultural tradition shape their understanding of motherhood.

Karen Refugees: Mothering Experiences in the Settlement Process

When asked about their mothering experiences in Canada, my participants’ mothering-related challenges came from three main stressors: role reversal, place-related, and losing cultural traditions. These stressors disrupted their mothering during the settlement process in Canada.

Role Reversal Stressor

The interview findings suggest that role reversal stress emerges from two factors: First, there is a sudden shift in traditional mother-child roles in Karen refugee families during the resettlement process. The main root cause of role reversal between mother and child is when children adapt more quickly to the new language, culture, and societal norms than their parents. As a result, Karen refugee children not only take on responsibilities traditionally held by their parents but also assume the role of primary communicators within the family. They often handle such tasks as translating for their parents during medical appointments, school meetings, or interactions with settlement agencies. This can lead to significant stress for both the children and their parents, particularly the mothers. Second, there is a sudden switch of the women’s roles from educators and teachers in the camps to ESL students or new learners in the host country.

For instance, Sai Roong, who was eleven when she arrived in Canada and was born in the Mae La Oon Refugee Camp, expressed her stress at having to

suddenly take on caregiving responsibilities for her parents and younger sister despite being a student:

My roles and responsibilities in refugee camps were as a student and as a daughter. My parents took care of everything for us, and our responsibilities were staying in school and doing house chores. My parents were the providers and caregivers. But as soon as we arrived in Canada, my parents were relying on me, and the roles reversed very quickly. As a child, I learned English faster and learned to adjust to our new environment quicker.... I became the parent/caregiver, and I had to look after my family. For example, my sister and I were ten years apart. I ended up having to be a parent to her in some ways, such as attending parent-teacher meetings while still in high school.

Grace, who was fifteen years old when she arrived in Canada, was under a great deal of stress because her parents relied on her as a translator when interacting with the hospital, insurance company, and bank because they were not provided a professional interpreter by settlement agencies or banks:

In Canada, my parents didn't know the language [English] until now ... so they relied on [their] children. I do have to help him [my father] when going to the hospital and like insurance stuff and banking. The bigger issue is banking ... they want to invest money for saving ... I tried to explain it but did not know all the vocabulary ... there was like a risk involved that, for example. if you put your money in the risky market, you get more returns like more interest ... I did not know about it either.

Gu Ruru, who was twenty-seven when she arrived in Canada and spent about fifteen years in refugee camps, took on the role of protector for underage children and elderly people as a social worker during her stay in the camps. However, the language barrier ruined the way she used to help her children in the camp, thereby giving her so much stress when she resettled in Canada: "Mothering experience in Canada was very hard because you know other people's children have the opportunity to have the support that they need. I wanted to do that for my children, too, but I could not do it ... my children ... ask for help with their homework, but I cannot help them. So sometimes my kids cry because I don't know how to help them."

Place-Related Stressors

My participants acknowledged that they were in a war-free zone; however, they still felt unsafe and were particularly concerned about their children's safety once in Canada. They had no idea which areas were safe, what local dangers to watch out for, and how to protect their family in a new environment.

These safety concerns led to constant worry, affecting their mental health and the ability to focus on other important aspects of resettlement, such as finding work or integrating into the community. Nya Nya Say expressed that the mother's role caused the most trouble in an unfamiliar place during her settlement process:

One of the roles that gave me the most trouble in the settlement process was being a mother. With a new country and new laws, I had to make changes and adjust my parenting style. For example, back home, the children can go anywhere, and I know that they will be safe because everyone knows each other, but here, the children can no longer go out on their own, which can be seen as taking freedom away from them. That can cause a huge conflict and issues between children and parents.

Similarly, Gu Ruru was deeply concerned about raising her children upon her arrival in Canada. She felt unsafe if her children wanted to go out at night, and she also worried about them becoming involved in drug-related activities. Considering these concerns, she decided to cease her employment and remain at home until her children reached a certain age, which she deemed appropriate for them to leave alone after school. Conversely, she experienced depression due to her lack of income: "I have a lot of worries ... for example, not to go out at night and not to get involved with drugs or like stuff that they are not supposed to ... when they are old enough to look after themselves, a little better for me to manage. So, when she [the child] was young, I stayed home to look up ... I feel depressed because I have no income."

Losing Cultural Traditions

The fear of losing cultural traditions was one of the profound stressors for Karen refugee mothers while raising their children in a new and vastly different cultural environment. My findings reveal a deep connection between this stressor and concerns about identity, belonging, and traditional preservation, which are crucial for mothers' and their children's self-esteem. My participants feared their children would lose touch with their Karen cultural roots, including language, customs, religious practices, and traditional values, as they quickly adapted to the dominant culture, gradually eroding their country's original cultural identity. My participants expressed significant distress over the potential undermining of Karen traditions and culture, which can result in feelings of loss and grief:

The kids here when they go with friends, I worry ... he [my son] said a bad word to me, so I got heartbroken, and I cried. When the kids come home [with friends] and lock the door, I worry and give them a time limit. (Chi Chi)

We attempt to keep our culture and teach our children, such as we do not encourage our children to live together (with boyfriends/girlfriends) before marriage because it is a big deal in our culture. (Chi Chi)

In the refugee camp, children were taught to respect their parents, but children here in Canada know their rights. (Daymu)

She [my daughter] said that she learned from her friend that [dating between two girls] is good. You know here (in Canada) the school promotes LGBTQ ... maybe they [students] misinterpreted what they learn from school. The school is just promoting not to discriminate among the LGBTQs. In the school, they teach sex education, but I think it is not necessary for my daughter's age yet. (Nu Nu)

In Canada, I cannot use harsh ways or words to my children, and I am afraid to discipline [my kids] because children know their rights ... they have too much freedom and misuse it. (Aye Than)

Notably, none of the participants (who did not go to school for a career) highlighted the impact of economic stressors but frequently expressed how language barriers can interfere with their parenting practices. Instead, some of them happily shared their experiences of trying to secure jobs through their friend networks, such as cleaning and farm jobs, all of which offer minimal pay and lack financial security. This could be why all my participants identified their spouses as family breadwinners.

Karen Refugee Mothers' Agency in Action

The concept of agency emerged within feminist and postcolonial studies to understand how marginalized individuals, such as women, migrants, and ethnic and racial minorities, actively resist their adversities within societies (Kanal and Rottmann 2). Collins underscores how different aspects of identity (such as race, gender, class, etc.) intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege and involve navigating these intersections and finding ways to thrive despite multiple layers of marginalization. Similarly, the Karen refugee mothers in London, Ontario, despite facing significant challenges in the settlement process, exhibited agency in their day-to-day lives by making decisions, acting, and navigating their new environment in ways that reflect their resilience, adaptability, and determination for the wellbeing of their children and their families. Various aspects of their daily lives manifested this agency, often in subtle yet powerful ways.

The findings indicate that my participants assumed primary roles in mothering-related responsibilities and overall family wellbeing, thereby

taking critical roles in their children's education and wellbeing, navigating social services, cultural adaptation and preservation, and building social networks. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with the educational system made it difficult for Karen refugee women to support their children's schooling. However, they found ways to overcome challenges, often seeking help from settlement agencies or community organizations while simultaneously learning English. All my participants attended ESL for a minimum of one year to a maximum of five years, and how long they took in ESL depended on their age and background upon arrival in Canada. For example, children and youth who completed elementary and secondary school (funded by NGOs) in camps needed just a year to settle in Canadian schools. This might be why seven participants were comfortable answering the questions in English, although they all faced language problems upon arrival in Canada. Another three participants had a limited understanding of English, but they felt more comfortable and confident when responding to my questions in the Karen language.

For instance, Gu Ruru's narratives (having lived in a camp for fourteen years) demonstrate her serious commitment to helping her children with their homework and to learning English and new things in Canada to overcome the challenges of settling in a new place.

When I got here [London] when my children were sick, it was such a big issue for me because I did not know where to go and how to get there ... it is giving me stress ... I went to a Church program once a week, where the Canadians helped newcomers with the language homework, and I took my children. This is the way I could help with my children's homework.... Sometimes we don't know how to get in and get out of a bus.... To overcome these challenges, I attended ESL school ... this is where I started learning language and learning more about new things.

Gu Ruru was one of the enthusiastic participants, and she tried her best to respond to my questions in English. She revealed that she attended an ESL class for four years, where she encountered a diverse range of students from various age groups. She expressed her excitement at becoming a Canadian citizen, having been without a nationality for fourteen years in the camp. When I asked about any challenges she faced in learning English among a diverse range of older and younger students, she responded: "I don't care who is good or bad in ESL class; I tried to go to ESL school seriously because I wanted to do a citizenship test."

Generally, the participants employed three coping strategies to overcome these challenges. First, they sought caregiving support from spouses and othermothers (e.g., daughters and grandmothers). Some participants had older

sons, but they only sought caregiving and school-related help (such as translating in parent-teacher meetings) from their younger daughters, even during the most challenging resettlement periods. This traditional source of support from women-centred networks contributed significantly to their ability to cope with the challenges they faced while resettling in Canada.

For instance, Sai Roong and Grace, who were as young as eleven and fifteen, respectively, when they arrived in Canada, were required to perform caregiving responsibilities and serve as translators for their parents. During the settlement process, Sai Roong and Grace shared their experiences of managing multiple roles, such as student, caregiver, and translator. Fortunately, their mothers now provide them with caregiving assistance. Sai Roong can currently manage a full-time job with her two children, ages seven and one, without the need to send them to daycare school, thanks to the caregiving assistance she receives from her mother. This finding demonstrates to what extent “organized, resilient, women-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers” (Collins 193) are key in understanding how women-centred agency contributes collectively to their resilience, adaptability, and proactive efforts to improve their situations and those of their families.

Second, all my participants maintained a positive outlook and optimism for the future, which is a powerful coping mechanism. They focussed on the opportunities that new environments offer despite the challenges they faced, thereby prioritizing their children’s education, employment opportunities for themselves and their spouses, and citizenship, all of which can give them a sense of purpose, direction, and self-motivation. Some examples are as follows:

When I arrived in Canada, I did not understand any words.... After three years in ESL, I can speak some English ...I try to go to school [ESL] seriously because I want to get citizenship ... I do not expect anything from the government agency in particular. I just accepted what I received, whatever they gave me, and then I tried to focus on preparing for the citizenship test. (Gu Ruru)

We can work here to support the kids.... To stay here, it’s a very good opportunity for my kids and very good to live in Canada where we can compare it in camps ... you know it’s like hell and heaven.... The good thing here is we have a right.... We worry when we have to move when living in the three camps because we don’t have a country. When I came here, you know, like we don’t need to worry about anything because we are safe ... we don’t need to worry about food we don’t need to worry about anything because my husband can find work here work. (Chi Chi)

I received child benefits [in Canada] and tried to manage as much as I could to pay back for my flight ticket loan.... I didn’t know what I

was supposed to receive from government agencies. All I knew was to come here to get away from the situation back home and for my family to be safe. (Aye Than)

Some participants who arrived in Canada at twenty-seven reported that wives and husbands engage in various types of work, such as cleaning and some machinist jobs, where they do not need to speak English extensively to earn a living. My participants showed appreciation for their jobs, regardless of their nature, because it was something they were not permitted to do in camps:

He [my husband] attended ESL for two years. I think I improved [more] than him. But he got a job through a Karen friend's referral. He worked as a metal worker [machinist] because he didn't need to speak English. (Aye Than)

When I moved to Canada, I worked at the hospital as a cleaner and cook, and I [took] care of my girls. (Chi Chi)

Third, all participants continued their cultural traditions and religious practices to cope with stress and to balance the cultures between the sending and receiving countries. For instance, Sai Roong, Nya Nya Say, and Nu Nu explained how believing in God and prayer service are important to overcome challenges and problems. They attended church regularly, and sometimes, they asked the church leader to come to their houses and pray together. Grace and Bee firmly believed that reading the Bible, attending church regularly, and engaging in prayer provided them with strength, reduced stress, and fostered positivity and gratitude for all aspects of life. Some participants stressed the importance of instilling cultural values in their children, as follows:

When I go to church, I tell my daughter to wear our traditional clothes ... at school, not to wear very revealing clothes ... and no makeup ... in the house ... to respect the pillow that we sleep on and also ... do not wear shoes inside the house.... When we walk to the front of the adults, we bow a little bit to show respect. (Nu Nu)

The Karen cultural value that I taught my children to overcome life challenges or prohibit problems was to be kind. The Karen are known for being hospitable, so I always taught my children to make friends rather than make enemies. (Nya Nya Say)

Keeping our Karen cultural values is very important to me. My children need to know their roots, history, and their backgrounds. Even though we are in a third country, I often share stories with my children about Karen, including watching videos online. I want to make sure they have the privilege to be born here, but it doesn't mean they don't have to work hard. (Sai Roong)

In summary, the intersectionality of refugee women's identities—encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class—plays a critical role in shaping Karen refugees' agency during the settlement process in Canada. While these intersecting identities can create significant challenges and constraints, they also provide opportunities for refugee women to exercise agency in various ways.

Conclusion

This article explores the intersecting identities of Karen refugee mothers—such as their gender role, race, migration patterns, socioeconomic background, and language proficiency—and how these identities profoundly shape their settlement experiences and mothering practices in Canada. These multiple, overlapping identities interact in complex ways, creating challenges and opportunities as they navigate rebuilding their lives in a new country. Three stressors (role reversal, place-related stressors, and losing cultural traditions) disrupted my participants' mothering during the settlement process in Canada. Despite the challenges, these refugee mothers demonstrated remarkable resilience and three coping strategies: seeking caregiving support from spouses and othermothers, maintaining a positive outlook and optimism, and continuing cultural traditions and faith-based religious practices. These women's agency in day-to-day lives significantly contributed to resisting intersecting challenges and creating unique experiences of privilege as “a Karen woman of the house” and a member of Karen women-centred networks in their community. Based on the findings, I argue that, in the forced migration context, women's agencies cannot be fully understood without identifying their stressors and other aspects of intersecting identities, such as mothers, othermothers, gender roles, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class.

All participants stated that they enjoy gender equality at home and have no concerns about it with their husbands. Their perception of gender equality, coupled with the presence of supportive spouses, contributed to the fact that all participants do not view their motherhood as oppressive or discriminatory; they assumed primary caregiver roles as “Karen women of the house.” They believed that being supportive, mutually respectful, making decisions together, and sharing domestic work and childcare were the key elements of building positive gender relations in their day-to-day lives. None of the participants from my sample regarded their mothering responsibilities as oppressive or as an example of gender discrimination. Holding onto traditional patriarchal beliefs, such as the idea that mothers should be the primary caregivers, reinforced the perception of progress and optimism within the family context.

However, they often overlooked ongoing challenges, such as racial discrimination and social inequality within the Canadian context. Maintaining more traditional gender norms in the Karen community puts new generations under pressure to conform, hindering their ability to fully embrace or experience the gender equality that Canadian society promotes.

My research is limited to a sample of ten Karen refugee women, who do not represent Ontario's entire Karen women population. However, my findings bridge the knowledge gap about minority refugee mothers' resettlement narratives in a culturally grounded family context. Understanding and addressing the complex and intersectional nature of Karen refugee women's experiences highlights the need for future research that explores how policymakers, service providers, and communities can better support refugee mothers, particularly those from protracted refugee situations, in their journey towards integration and empowerment in Canada. The results also show that helping refugee mothers, especially those who have been refugees for a long time, requires services that are sensitive to their culture and an approach that looks at all aspects of the problem with a focus on family-centered solutions. Particularly, ESL classes are a critical resource for refugee mothers. However, their current structures and one-size-fits-all approach seem to be falling short of meeting the unique challenges and needs of the Karen refugee group. ESL classes categorize learners based on their general proficiency levels, but they neglect to consider variations in literacy or formal education and lack culturally relevant content. Placing refugee mothers from protracted refugee situations, who had limited or interrupted schooling in the camps, in the same class as younger learners hinders their ability to thrive in generalized programs. Curriculum design seems to overlook the specific needs and experiences of refugee mothers, such as practical language skills for navigating healthcare, schools, or housing systems.

Based on the findings, I suggest some family-oriented solutions to make ESL more useful for refugee mothers. These include categorizing learners based on the same ethnic group with small class sizes and the same family members with different ages rather than always emphasizing proficiency levels, particularly for those who are attending ESL for job-hunting purposes; offering flexible class schedules, including facilitating online learning options and on-site childcare; providing transportation support or mobile ESL services in refugee-dense areas; and incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds and life experiences into lessons. Implementing an intersectional approach with family-oriented strategies can create an inclusive environment where refugee mothers feel supported and empowered by policymakers, service providers, and communities. This approach ensures they have the resources and opportunities to rebuild their lives and contribute to Canadian society, fostering resilience, integration, and mutual understanding.

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Mothering without My Mother: A Psychotherapist's Journey

Early mother loss leaves one lacking guidance, nurture, and advice, much like a ship endlessly looking for its lighthouse. How does one process the world after they have been robbed of the experience of having a mother? The author, a perinatal psychotherapist who lost her mother in adolescence, offers an examination and reflection of the multilayered ways that the loss of her mother has affected her and shaped her choices in life. To understand mothering, she becomes a mother-focused therapist before then becoming a mother herself. She uses her own experience to share and describe the conscious and unconscious manifestations of grief, highlighting the confusion and perpetual longing that come with loss that occurs before one's identity has had a chance to fully develop. The author incorporates research on motherless mothers, ties concepts from mother and infant attachment to motherlessness, explores the power and subtlety of continuing bonds, and examines the impact that media parental representations can have on a person's loss and grief, as well as bonding. The finality of loss is juxtaposed with the endlessness of the search and pining for the deceased. Through an autoethnographic recollection of memories and reembodiment of the past, this article provides a useful accompaniment to studies on bereaved adolescents and motherless daughters attempting to navigate living life without their lighthouse.

My mom never let me pluck my eyebrows. “When something is so beautiful you don’t mess with it,” she would say. I was fourteen, Princess Diana hadn’t yet been dead a year, and I resented the less-than-royal brows that I’d see each morning before school in the bathroom mirror. But my mom was wise and knew things I didn’t, so each morning I borrowed a little of her strength, sighed into the mirror, and left them alone.

My mother died on a Saturday morning. I found out on Sunday afternoon. I fell to the ground when my father said the words. I still remember that

sentence vividly, and how I felt the power of gravity when I lost my balance, like I was an apple falling from a tree. My knees turned into jelly. The ground pulled me down. Down, down, down.

Before they buried her, I wrote her a letter and put it in a legal-sized envelope on which I wrote “Mama.” My cousin threw it in the hole on top of her coffin for me, and he almost slipped and fell. His mother gasped. They asked us if they should open the casket so that we could see her one last time. “No, no, no!” my father shouted. She had burned when the car exploded and was apparently made unrecognizable. I have been wondering what she looked like in there for the past twenty-six years, feeling relief that I will never know for sure.

Many years later, a therapist told me that what I had experienced was not just a death but a disappearance. There was nothing to ground me in her death. Even though we held the traditional rituals, such as a funeral and burial, which help the brain organize itself around the loss, I never saw her body other than when it was alive and normal. With her death, my mother just kind of vanished. She was brushing her teeth, getting dressed in front of her mirror, eating a bite of toast, and an hour later she was no longer a living being. She was a body that needed to be identified and buried, a forty-three-year-old woman whose affairs needed handling, a loss that needed to be mourned and coped with. The disbelief I felt made me question reality, much like what Hope Edelman observes from other motherless daughters experiencing the sudden death of a parent (80). I wondered if she hadn’t perhaps gotten lost in the woods near the highway, where the accident had happened. “Maybe she is walking around and can’t get to a phone,” I said. Even years later, I thought maybe it was all a big misunderstanding. She might come back, once she finds her way. But the only way for her was down into the ground, and there she stayed. Down, down, down. My mother would never be seen again.

The things that I remember are random. I remember her fainting one time, and that I felt scared. I have forgotten the sound of her voice, but I can hear her laughter safely stored in the ribcage area of my body. I remember the texture of her hair, skin, and nails, the shape of her ring finger nail, and her posture. I remember her teeth and her height. I remember we ate grapes in front of the television in the evening. She had become invested in *My So-Called Life*, the cult television show that defined my generation, much to my delight. I liked that she knew who Angela Chase was and that she knew all about Angela’s problems with Jordan Catalano. I wondered what she thought of the mother in the show, Patty Chase, whose scenes I just wished I could fast-forward at the time because I was so bored by her. These days, I look at her differently. I am curious. Maybe she was the real heroine of the show. Adolescents often identify and even shape their own cultural identities based on television shows they watch (Stern 421), and *My So-Called Life* creator, Winnie

Holzman, talked about how “unfinished” the characters in the show were: “Every character was in a state of flux. Everyone was trying to figure out who they were. Everyone was trying to figure out their identity. The adults and the children and the kids” (qtd. in Seitz). What did my mother think about it all, sitting on that couch with me? It all feels unbearably unfinished.

Bethwyn Rowe and Bronwyn A. Harman found that for motherless mothers, there is a profound longing for information, knowledge, and details, which are made unrecoverable following a mother’s passing (34). I’m now a practising psychotherapist based in New York City, where I work primarily with pregnant people, mothers adjusting to the postpartum period, and mothers who experienced pregnancy losses. I see fertility issues, reproductive fantasies, traumatic births survivors, anxious new moms, and fathers with irritability and mood issues trying their best to cope with the sleep deprivation that comes with having a newborn baby. I see mothers with relationship issues and couples with babies in their bassinets on Zoom. Amid a motherless life, I ensured that my professional self would be mother-full. Two years ago, I gave birth to a little girl. When she was four months old, I took her for a springtime walk in the park in a baby carrier that pressed us face to face, chest to chest. As we walked, I narrated what was in front of us. “Tree... branch... a doggie!” I was becoming fluent in Parentese. “Honey, look at that beautiful red bird! Is this your grandma? I think your grandma is here!” A spiritual thrill overwhelmed me. My chest rose, pressing it deeply into my daughter’s. Heart to heart. I thought of Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman’s words: “As mourners move on with their lives to find new roles, new directions, and new sources of gratification, they experience the past as very much a part of who they are. The deceased are both present and not present at the same time. It is possible to be bereft and not bereft simultaneously, to have a sense of continuity and yet to know that nothing will ever be the same.” (351). My daughter answered me with an enthusiastic, full-bodied burp.

I look for my mother everywhere. I look for her in myself, in my daughter, in motherly clinical supervisors, in all the figures and the shadows. My one life was split into two: my first life, before her accident, life as I knew it, and my other life, the one without her, the motherless life. I navigated life from “oneness” (Chodorow 112) with my mother to aloneness, in perpetual search of her wisdom, trying to come to terms with the void, eventually finding gratitude for my “angels in the nursery” (Lieberman et al. 506).

She died, and we were left with all her clothes. Of course, one knows what to do with the pretty wool coat. You keep it forever, wear it to your friend’s winter wedding, and smile an invisible smile when you see it hanging in the closet. But what do you do with a dead mother’s bras and underwear? What about the leftovers she was going to eat that night? What do you do with her contact lenses—these pieces of plastic that would have gone on her eyes, but

now her eyes are shut forever and gone? Children who lose their mother want to know: “How come the earth doesn’t stop?”

I didn’t have a clue. I stood in that bathroom on a sunny-but-cold February Monday in 1998, looking at her hairbrush on the sink, the knots of dark blond hair, the only parts of her body left above ground. Then, I looked into the mirror and started to pluck my eyebrows.

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Maternal Ambivalence and Loss in a Changing China from a Daughter's Perspective

This article explores the intricate dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship amid the sociocultural transformation of post-Mao China from the 1980s to the present from a daughter's perspective. Employing an autoethnographic method combined with cultural and theoretical analysis, this article first examines how concepts such as "maternal ambivalence," "self-silencing," and "feminine attachment behaviours" manifest within the unique sociocultural context of China. The second section connects these theoretical and cultural frameworks to my narration of my mother's story, focussing on three key dimensions: her mothering, romantic suffering, and terminal illness. This article argues that my mother's maternal identity and personal suffering were deeply intertwined with the conflicts between traditional family hierarchies and the rise of emotional intimacy as a societal ideal for mother-daughter relationships in the 1990s. Her avoidant coping mechanisms, shaped by romantic trauma and sociocultural pressures, not only led to her precursory delusion and eventual death but also created silences in our bond that complicated my grieving process and deepened the transmission of trauma across generations. By weaving personal epiphanies with cultural and theoretical insights, this article contributes to the scholarship on motherhood, grief, trauma, and the evolving mother-daughter bond within the context of modernizing East Asian societies.

A Daughter's (Un)Biased Perspective

My mother hid all her secrets in her piano—the piano she bought for me during my childhood and moved with me three times. Although I no longer play it, the piano became a source of comfort after her death. When moving to Canada, I unexpectedly found a secret file bag hidden in the piano I left behind. These well-preserved letters, diaries, and legal documents outline her poignant and traumatic love story. I went through her writings with her sisters,

and through their accounts, I came to know her more as a woman than a mother and gradually realized the influence her traumatic experiences had on me. In the hopes of better understanding my mother's story and her mothering, I intend to explore her traumatic grief in divorce and her silence and authority in mothering that ultimately allows me to reconnect with my mother—both as a woman and as a mother.

My mother was born in 1964 on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, a proletarian movement led by the communist leader Mao Zedong. I was born in 1990 in a town in China under the single-child policy. Since reforms and opening up in 1978, which marked the start of the post-Mao era, China has undergone a significant socioeconomic transformation. This shift has also dramatically altered Chinese culture and familial relationships, introducing a focus on individualization and personal self-fulfillment (Evans, "The Gender of Communication" 981). However, traditional filial piety—the virtue that orients collectivist and family ethics and values love and respect for parents and elders—remains a code of conduct with universal social significance in China (MacCormack). Accordingly, my cross-generational relationship within this context aligns with contradictions inherent in China's social structure at the family unit level.

This article draws on my personal experience, my mother's secret diary, and family accounts to interpret her suffering and mothering. As a daughter, I can only partially understand the internal experience of mothering, and my perspective may be biased. However, the unique perspective of an adult daughter situated in a Chinese sociocultural context could benefit broader motherhood studies by incorporating an autoethnographic approach alongside cultural and theoretical analysis. Autoethnography is an academic writing approach that investigates and describes (graphy) the author's personal experience (auto) and, more importantly, critically uncovers the social and cultural discourse (ethno) through deep self-reflection. Autoethnography explores personal "epiphanies"—moments that shape a person's life (Ellis et al. 3)—and enlightens the audience "in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner and Ellis 111).

To critically reflect on and contextualize the inherent subjectivity of a daughter's perspective, this article engages with theoretical frameworks in maternal studies, psychoanalytical feminism, and cultural theory. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's distinction between institutional motherhood and the lived experience of mothering, I examine the tensions in my mother's maternal identity. The concept of maternal ambivalence, as articulated by scholars like Barbara Almond, is central to understanding my mother's conflicting emotions of love, depression, and control. Additionally, Jane Ussher's research on women's mental disorders and attachment helps frame my analysis of how my mother's trauma and silence shaped our bond. Finally, Harriet Evans's

exploration of women's gendered sense of self in post-Mao China helps situate my narrative within the broader sociocultural transformations of the era.

This article argues that my mother's sufferings, romantic trauma, and maternal identity are deeply intertwined with the transformation of the Chinese political economy and culture in the twenty-first century. Her maternal ambivalence stems from a conflict between the hierarchical family discipline rooted in Confucianism and the rising societal expectations for a communicative and emotionally close mother-daughter relationship since the 1990s. Her romantic sufferings reflect her avoidant coping mechanisms, which not only led to her precursory delusion and eventual death but also brought silence in our attachment and complicated my grief of her maternal loss.

Maternal Ambivalence in Social Transformation

Motherhood studies were in the spotlight of feminist theory by the mid-1970s, about a decade after the start of second-wave feminism (see Chodorow; Lizarre; Rich, for example). As second-wave feminists began to challenge women's traditional roles, they worked on redefining motherhood, which had been viewed as limiting women's agency. Adrienne Rich critiques institutional motherhood, arguing that patriarchal norms confine women to the roles of wife and mother, denying their other identities (39-40). Along Rich's lines, O'Reilly refers to mothering as opposed to motherhood, purporting that feminist and empowered mothering "could be experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change" (805).

My mother was born during the period of second-wave feminism. However, the wave sweeping the West barely reached China. Instead, women's status was dominated by China's national conditions. Women's liberation influentially began in 1958, the eighth year of the foundation of the new China, when Mao advocated for women to engage in a variety of productive labours and do the same as men, encouraging a gender-neutral representation of women (qtd. in Evans 12). In the Mao era, the ideology of gender equality (*nannü pingdeng*) was secondary to the proletarian revolution. As a result, the ephemeral liberation of women shattered when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, and the "public images of a sweet and gentle femininity" reappeared (Evans, *The Subject of Gender* 13).

The traditional gender role differences in China are rooted in millennia-old Confucian philosophy. According to the spatial and ritual division of "inside" (*nei*) and "outside" (*wai*), women are strictly restricted to their domestic roles and do not have a role beyond their family (Rosenlee ch. 3.2). A good woman should act up to "three Obediences and the four virtues" (*sancong side*), which requires her to obey her father, husband, and son and regulate her actions and

speech (Rosenlee ch. 4.1). In the early twenty-first century, while the ancient code has been abandoned long since the establishment of new China, the “men outside the home, women inside” (*nanzhuhwai, nüzhunei*) point of view still influences the spouses’ family practices. This embedded gender hierarchy explains the fixed expectations of women’s domestic roles in the liberation movement and the resurgence of traditional feminine images after that.

Within motherhood studies, the mother-daughter relationship is one of the primary areas of inquiry. Evans elaborates on the specificity and signification of the mother-daughter relationship in gender studies: “Narratives about the relationship between daughters and mothers reveal powerful ties linking the present and future ... and offer rich insights into processes and meanings of change in understandings of gender” (*The Subject of Gender* 17). Derived from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of sexual differences, especially the Oedipus complex, the theme of the mother-daughter relationship has historically centered on separation, particularly emphasizing the decisive influence of early childhood experiences (Benjamin; Chodorow; Friday). This theoretical perspective, however, overlooks sociocultural factors and the adult daughter’s agency and marginalizes the specificity of female identities in family relationships. In recent decades, more scholars have argued that closeness instead of separation is the key to the mother-daughter relationship (Edelman; Evans; O’Reilly). Drawing upon Western feminist writers, O’Reilly emphasizes that the close mother-daughter relationship empowers the formation of the daughter’s self-worth, especially in her adolescence (163). Evans draws a similar conclusion in her research on daughters and mothers in urban China, indicating that the adult daughter’s self, while maintaining independence, “remains tied to the mother’s as a condition of its own formation” (*The Subject of Gender* 2).

The evolving sociocultural situation in China also represents such mother-daughter dynamics. In traditional Chinese family systems, a married daughter is likened to “spilt water” (*pochuqu de shui*) that cannot be gathered up again, symbolizing her forced separation from her parents’ home and subordination to her husband’s family (*The Subject of Gender* 18). Conversely, in contemporary urban China, Xiong Jingming’s case study demonstrates a transformation of the mother-married-daughter relationship from separation into closeness. The married daughter stays close to her mother, particularly through the mother’s involvement in rearing the daughter’s offspring. Although such ritual practice denotes the oppression from patriarchal society, Xiong believes it also manifests mother-daughter solidarity (106).

When the mother-daughter relationship moves beyond Freud’s psychoanalytical framework and towards a sense of closeness, the interplay between contemporary values and traditional discourses creates various conflicts and dilemmas in mothering. O’Reilly acknowledges the paradox between the

promise of feminist mothering and the feminist maternal practice that remains to be solved (819). Barbara Almond defends “the dark side of motherhood” and proposes “maternal ambivalence” to depict mothers’ mixed feelings of loving and hating towards their children and their subsequent anxiety, shame, and guilt due to being socially unacceptable (2). She classifies the main causes that may intensify ambivalence, highlighting rigid social expectations and cultural imperatives of being a good mother and engaging in correct child-rearing (9).

Maternal ambivalence shows more complex representations regarding daughters’ age groups and more oppressed social norms in contemporary China. For their toddler daughters’ future happiness, Chinese mothers often wish for their independence and excellence, recognizing these qualities as essential for women to secure a place in society. However, they are concerned about their daughters being too independent and excellent to be accepted by a social hierarchy where men are assumed to excel over women (Fong et al. 89). Researchers believe such dilemmas reflect unequal gender rights in contemporary China (110). Chinese mothers are expected to develop a communicative bond of mutual trust with their adolescent and adult daughters. Associated with the marketization and urbanization in China’s post-Mao era, Harriet Evans proposes an emotional or intimate turn starting from the mid-1990s—“from a generalized assertion of women’s emotional qualities to the recent growing emphasis on women’s capacity for sharing and communicating with [their] children” (“Chinese Modernity” 136).

Except for serving political and economic reforms, other main reasons for this trend include the overall improvements in material conditions and the one-child policy. As living conditions steadily improved, the focus of parenting shifted from material safety to spiritual insurance, while the one-child policy enabled parents to dedicate themselves to the well-rounded growth of a single child. As Evans explains, “Cautioned not to spoil her single child, nor to give in to the desire to overwhelm her child in ‘oppressive love,’ the successful mother has to be the skilful domestic manager, empathetic friend, and moral advisor to her happy and healthy child” (“Chinese Modernity” 134). Meanwhile, Evans’s interviews with daughters illustrate mothers’ challenges in achieving this standard and daughters’ aspirations for this ideal relationship and sense of dismay (129–32). Once a mother’s and daughter’s expectations are inconsistent, Xiong claims that conflicts possibly arise in their relations (101). This conflict with the daughter’s expectations aggravates the mother’s guilt and anxiety.

In summary, rapid sociopolitical changes in post-Mao China have reshaped ideas of the “good woman” and “good mother,” creating tensions between traditional values and contemporary expectations. However, the influence of conventional parenting values does not disappear. Caught in the middle of

various expectations, mothers confront dilemmas, manifesting maternal ambivalence. Furthermore, my mother's coping mechanisms in her romantic life mirrored her maternal ambivalence, which, in turn, influenced her ability to connect emotionally with me as a daughter. Through the lens of the mother's suffering and death, I subsequently explore how the mother's trauma passes onto the daughter and influences the daughter's self-formation.

Shared Trauma and Complicated Grief

We face many losses in life, from early separations to major events like divorce and death. Loss is accompanied by subsequent grief and mourning, which are psychological and physical manifestations in reaction to loss. Freud classifies mourning as normal and pathological. Whereas normal mourning helps the mourner develop new relationships after the mourning process, pathological grief indicates patients' inability to adapt to new environments and change their life patterns (Freud 250–51). Although Freud's distinction between normal and pathological mourning has greatly influenced grief studies, feminist scholars like Jane Ussher challenge its male-centered perspective, highlighting the ways married women's depression and grief in facing relationship breakdown are often pathologized within a framework of traditional gender norms (42).

Before the mid-twentieth century, divorce in China was rare and deemed scandalous. Women must be obedient to their husbands and rely on bearing a son to secure their status in their husbands' homes (Lu and Wang 414). In 1950, the enactment of the first marriage law changed the legal context of marriage by prohibiting bigamy and arranged marriage. However, the divorce rate was still low until the 1980s when the new marriage law and one-child policy were implemented. With the social and economic transformations, new policies facilitated free-choice marriage, lessened the restriction on granting divorce, and greatly decoupled marriage and reproduction (Evans, *The Subject of Gender* 184; Lu and Wang 415). The crude divorce rate from 1990 to 2000 steadily grew, according to the China National Bureau of Statistics, but kept at less than one in one thousand, which was far behind the United States and European nations (Lu and Wang 44).¹ Evans believes that the relatively low divorce rate in this period simultaneously resulted from “a lengthy history of a cultural model of patrilineality” (*The Subject of Gender* 128) combined with incomplete gender equality driven by the communist government, which clings to the traditional gender roles of family and domestic life for political stability (12).

Xiong believes that “the legitimacy of women's freedom in their choice of marriage partners and divorce” (5) is a major factor affecting women's status in the family and familial relationships in contemporary urban China. My

mother got divorced from my biological father in 1993 when I was three years old and had her second divorce in 2006 after a ten-year remarriage. In the 1990s, it was common to view marriage as the most significant event to determine a woman's happiness for the rest of her life. According to Suet Lin Hung's study, less educated female subjects regard divorce as unacceptable and pathological and ascribe the failure of marriage to divorced women's mental illness or personality flaws (4). In comparison, my mother had a postsecondary education, which was rare in that period in the small town where she was raised. After graduation, she devoted her whole life to her profession as a music teacher in an elementary school. As such, higher education and reputable employment endowed her with a greater sense of self and independence and the authority to divorce, challenging the environment where the marriage decision was still family-based—families and friends would discourage women from divorcing for the sake of children's wellbeing. Instead, my mother did not disclose any thoughts to her family until the divorce was finalized. Her self-silencing, on the one hand, suggests that she was a liberal feminine subject, taking control of her destiny. On the other, it reflects her attempt to avoid shame in a Chinese culture where the collective often takes precedence over the individual ("Psychotherapy in China"). Furthermore, psychological counselling was not an option for her, since seeking help for mental health issues was still a stigma for many people at that time (Higgins et al. 105). As such, her avoidant coping mechanisms isolated her from support, shaping the avoidant attachment between us during her illness and death.

John Bowlby defines attachment as "an ongoing relationship ... an internalized propensity to seek proximity to and contact with a preferred attachment figure, usually the mother" (352). By interacting with mothers, children develop either secure or insecure attachments, in which overprotective parenting leads to anxious attachment, whereas emotional distance fosters avoidant attachment. In their relationship with others, "the anxious/ambivalent remained excessively reliant on others ... whereas the avoidant became compulsively self-reliant and distrustful of others" (Parkes and Prigerson 191). Resonating with insecure attachment, Dana Jack proposes "feminine attachment behaviours" with self-silencing as a primary schema. Self-silencing represses women's own needs and expressions in relationships, extensively correlating with women's depression and even risk of death (Jack 40).

Bowlby's theory, while foundational, has been critiqued for prioritizing early childhood attachments and loss. My mother's story illustrates how divorce as a loss brings traumatic experiences and how cultural and relational factors can reshape attachment dynamics well into adulthood. My mother died from lung cancer when I was twenty-two years old, but the underlying trigger of her disease was her posttraumatic stress disorder after her second divorce. In the 1990s and 2000s, extramarital affair on the husband's part was

the biggest reason for divorce (Ma), and my mother's second marriage was no exception. Chinese society exhibits much higher moral tolerance of men's sexual infidelity than that of women, with men who have an affair being labelled "successful" and "attractive" to some extent. In contrast, women having an affair carry the stigma (Liu et al. ch. 5.2). Even though women like my mother are cheated on and are victims, they are blamed for failing to manage their husbands or having lost sexual attraction through aging. Self-silencing and avoidant attachment made my mother bear the humiliation and social pressure alone, culminating in persecutory delusion—a type of delusion in which individuals firmly believe that someone or a group is planning to harm them despite a definite lack of proof. Although her romantic suffering is personal and specific, her traumatic disorder reflects the dilemma of the group of highly educated and working women in China's fast-changing society; they are trapped between the image of excellent and independent women and the shackles of conventional gender expectations.

Although my mother endured her delusions in isolation, she could not face late-stage cancer without me. A fatal illness renders the continuity of the mother-daughter relationship a conjunct challenge (Manderson 192). In China, daughters are called "mother's little heart warmer" (*tiexin xiao mian'ao*) not only because of their irreplaceable emotional bond but also because women are expected to be responsible for the burdensome care of elderly or ill parents (Huang et al. 60). Women's significantly more frequent, intensive, and emotionally invested caregiving compared to men highlights unequal gender role ideologies and entails judgment of a daughter's filial piety and intimacy with her parents.

Furthermore, chemotherapy and radiation therapy can dramatically change the patient's body due to the severe side effects. As the illness gets worse, the patient loses all hair as well as control of the body's functions and suffers from intense pain. Through a psychoanalytic feminist lens, Naomi Lowinsky claims that the feminine body fundamentally constructs a woman's identity. Therefore, "when a daughter watches a mother die, especially from an illness, she becomes aware of her own physical vulnerability as a female" (Edelman 274). The mother's way of dealing with the physical distortions influences the daughter's attitudes toward illness, stress, femininity, and body image (110), to which I would like to add anxiety, self-esteem, and shame, as well as self-compassion and vulnerability.

When a mother dies from an illness, the mother-daughter relationship is not terminated; instead, the attachment embraces the experience of grief and mourning following the loss of the attachment figure (Groh 11). An avoidant adult in bereavement tends to inhibit their grief and produce feelings of guilt, where the grief does not disappear; rather, the complicated course of grief leads to prolonged grief disorder (Parkes and Prigerson 294). My avoidant

manifestations—including self-reliance, self-criticism, and celibacy for eleven years after my mother’s death—denote my persistence and internalization of the attachment pattern to my mother and the transmission of trauma from my mother to me. Next, I recount some pivotal experiences surrounding my mother’s mothering, romantic suffering, and terminal illness, illustrating the complicated mother-daughter dynamics in the context of social transformation in China.

Daughter’s Narratives within Chinese Culture

My Mother’s Mothering

My grandmother had four children, and my mother was the oldest one. Among the four daughters, my mother’s personality was most like my grandfather’s. “Both of them were quite introverted and serious,” my grandmother said. “They always kept things to themselves and did not communicate with us.” My grandfather was a typical parent in a patriarchal society, getting everything his way and allowing no one in the family to question him. One incident my grandmother shared revealed the severity of his parenting style. When my mother was in primary school, one day at home, she held a textbook and asked my grandfather how to pronounce a specific word. The strong accent might have distorted his pronunciation; my mother pointed out that her teacher did not pronounce it as he did. Regarding her response as challenging to his parental authority, my grandfather immediately slapped my mother. The blow was so hard it left her whole face red and swollen.

My mother’s mothering style manifests the transmission of traditional parenthood values. She was a controlling, serious mother with high expectations. She bought a piano for me and taught me to play when I was five. With the support of a good instrument and a hands-on teacher, I was supposed to make great achievements in piano playing. However, I quickly quit when I was enrolled in middle school. The main reason was my mother’s strictness and constant scolding, which made me too afraid of practicing in front of her. One vivid memory stands out: We were sitting on the piano stool, and she excoriated me loudly in my ear after I practiced a piece of music. I could barely register her words; the sheer volume overwhelmed me. Instinctively, I put my hands over my ears. In an instant, she slapped my hands and yelled even louder, “Don’t you dare not listen!” It was only later, after learning about my maternal grandfather’s parenting style, that I began to understand the transgenerational connections behind her strictness.

My mother’s authority extended to alienating me from my biological father. After she divorced my biological father, I rarely had contact with him. He had not fulfilled the obligation of paying child support, which increased my mother’s burden of raising me alone, intensifying her resentment towards him.

Wanting me to stand by her side, my mother restricted my meetings with my father and instilled her unilateral narrative in me. As a child, I accepted her narrative and willingly cut off contact with my father, as if to show loyalty to her and gratitude for her sacrifice. While this dynamic generally reflects that Chinese parents naturally believe they have the right to intrude into children's lives, it also highlights the deep-rooted desire for a symbiotic relationship between a mother and daughter.

As Evans elucidates, communication has become a new requirement to be a good mother in twenty-first-century China. This expectation could result in Chinese mothers' ambivalence, as they have been accustomed to maintaining prestige. My mother rarely discussed things with me beyond studying, neither her hardship in raising me nor her troubles in her marriage. Similarly, I was reluctant to share my adolescent troubles with her because I was educated that the most important thing for a student is studying well. This belief left me feeling that seeking understanding or sympathy would be futile. When my mother was struggling with the messiness of her second divorce, I experienced my silent distress—changing my name after hers and having everyone at school know. While I wanted to support her, I dreaded my peers' reactions and their curious stares. In pain, I wrote "It's not my fault; I cannot bear it" on a notepaper and then tied and hid it in my piggy bank. The sentiment may sound only like adolescent sentimentality, but the short sentence expressed my frustration with the unavoidable changes in my life brought about by my mother's circumstances. The next day, when I was putting in another notepaper, I was astonished to find the previous one was opened and creased, with a deep pinch mark that had even torn the paper. My mother must have found and read it. I could even imagine her implacable guilt, anguish, and sense of disempowerment culminating at that moment. Yet, she never mentioned it. Neither did I. Her silence, while isolating, may have been an effort to protect me from her pain, reflecting the cultural expectation for mothers to endure hardship without complaint.

My mother's other side as an independent, strong-willed, and assertive woman in the new era deeply influenced me as well. She taught me to do the laundry and cook when I was young, wishing me to be self-reliant instead of marrying better in the future. She dared to travel alone to Singapore even though she knew nothing about English and had never gone abroad. While she did not talk too much, her daily life practices served as an example and guided and encouraged me to break down the obsolete social disciplining of women. After her death, I returned to the university for further studies as a master's student to realize my artistic dream and then pursued the PhD path in Canada—my first time travelling abroad. Social prejudices, like "women shouldn't aim too high," faded as I pursued my goals.

My Mother's Romantic Sufferings

I did not know my mother had persecutory delusions until the day we took her ashes back to my hometown. Following the funeral home's arrangement, I held the heavy and big marble urn throughout the journey. In the car, her sisters began to discuss my mother's prolonged suffering from persecutory delusion and its causes. The most significant symptom was her unreasonable belief that her ex-husband and his mistress had poisoned her towel and she requested her sisters to send it for inspection. Even though the result showed nothing abnormal, she continued to doubt other things—I suddenly understood why she had locked doors and shuttered windows every day.

During the funeral procession, my aunts followed the Chinese custom of throwing paper money. While papers drifted behind us, my mind drifted, too. Did my mother have psychosis? Instantly, her image as an elegant woman and a serious teacher was almost subverted in my mind, and I felt my mother being alienated from me. Simultaneously, I felt guilty for not realizing that her suffering and anguish were far greater than I had imagined.

Almost all my mother's secret documents are about her ex-husband. She even carefully preserved the hand-written letters they exchanged when they first met each other. However, the finer sounding those words were, the harder she was hit later when she discovered his affair. In her diaries, she astonishingly recorded the man's everyday whereabouts and mentioned her deteriorating health, self-soothing thoughts, and me.

As your wife, I have never betrayed you in the past. I am not betraying you now, and I will never betray you in the future. I believe you did not betray me as well but did something wrong out of impulse. You just have to wake up and change. Marriage for a day is a hundred days of grace, and marriage for ten years is even deeper. Remember, we have been thick and thin together; now what is important is having a happy life. I sent many text messages, but he never replied. He only replied when I asked him to call. Every time, he asked for mutual understanding and trust but did not talk about the actual content. (June 2006)

I do not know exactly what he wants to do. Anyways, I am recovering well now, and school will start in a few days. Family matters cannot be changed quickly just by me saying so. I just need to relax, live a healthy and happy life, take good care of my daughter, let her live happily, and make progress in her studies. I read several articles in *Reader's Digest* today, which deeply inspired me to understand the true meaning of life: Safeness is a blessing, ordinariness is a blessing, and peace is a blessing. (August 2006)²

My mother's words were rational, restrained, and wise, denoting her good education along with traditional family values at the same time. She proactively sought communication with her former husband, yet her focus remained on facts and reason, often suppressing her emotions. This inhibition made her writing sound as if she were describing someone else's life. Through repressing anger, she expected to avoid relationship breakdown; through rational analysis and self-criticism, she tended to prevent herself from being overwhelmed by her horror, anxiety, and loneliness. While my mother's emotional restraint shaped my approach to self-expression, my interpretation of her actions remains inherently influenced by my perspective as her daughter.

My mother and my life path separated when I left home and studied at a university in another city. Enjoying my time on campus, I thought everything was getting better. However, it was during this period that the traumatic experiences broke my mother's body and soul. Her ex-husband refused to pay the remaining damages, colluded with his mistress to make a false counter-charge, and maliciously spread personal correspondence between him and my mother at the school where she worked. After my mother filed for civil enforcement, my stepfather and his mistress could not avoid their obligation but maliciously brought a bag of coins and asked my mother to count them. Reading my mother's complaint letter to the court, I could imagine how she was repeatedly traumatized by recounting the details of the events that hurt her. How could she not feel fear dealing with such a catalogue of personal persecution? In public, she appeared tough and unyielding; in private, the repression of her emotions led to feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, resulting in a physical and emotional breakdown. My mother's romantic suffering not only left psychological scars but also set the stage for her emotional detachment and subsequent physical decline during her terminal illness.

My Mother's Terminal Illness

A painful illness that leads to the death of a loved one leaves behind correspondingly agonizing memories (Parkes and Prigerson 76). Indeed, I do not remember much about my mother's hospitalization and treatment, nor do I recall the exact details of our conversations, as we rarely opened up to each other. However, I vividly remember the moments when I had to assist her with even the simplest daily routines, tasks she could no longer manage. In these moments, the body became our primary medium of communication, a channel through which we shared our vulnerability and mutual trauma.

My mother was diagnosed with small-cell lung cancer in my first year of employment at a software company in a city two-hour drive north of my hometown. This aggressive cancer has a "high degree of malignancy, rapid disease progression, poor prognosis and easy recurrence" (Cui et al. 355).

Therefore, we knew initially that my mother might not survive for more than five years or, according to medical data, the average life span of two to three years. The fact of mortality initially left me frozen, then brought an uncanny feeling to me: How should I live together with my mother to face the countdown to her end?

The life-threatening disease violently disrupted our everyday world. Before her diagnosis, my mother was busy with the interior of her new apartment in the city where I was working, envisioning a life with me after her retirement. To continue to work normally and provide better care for my mother, I brought her to live with me and hired a domestic worker. I accompanied my mother day and night to the hospital, giving my best to ensure her comfort. When she rested at home, I improved my living skills and looked after the rest of the things for our new home. As if by being busy with instrumental tasks, the anxiety and fear of my mother's anticipatory mortality were lessened.

Even so, I still noticed that my mother acted overly optimistic. Although I was relieved to see her responding positively to treatments, I was also concerned by how rarely she expressed negative emotions. In the first courses of treatment, as the cancer cells were effectively inhibited, she appeared confident, talking and even singing cheerfully in the inpatient ward. She had enough energy to lecture me about "knowing the ways of the world" and to express her disapproval of my boyfriend. Even when she had to shave off her beautiful hair, she did so without complaint, although she was a woman who always cared about appearance. However, she firmly refused to read the articles by recovered patients that I carefully collected to encourage her. I knew she was avoiding her fear.

We all expected the furnishings to be finished as soon as possible because the cancer returned faster and more aggressively, so living in the new home might have been her last wish. Only a few months after the completion of the interior work, with no time for formaldehyde to dissipate, we moved into our new home. My mother was initially pleasant but increasingly struggled to control her body. A couple of nights, I was roused by the noise from her attempt to slide off the bed. Due to side effects, she had to go to the bathroom quite often, but she did not awaken me, even though she could barely stand up. I hurriedly caught her and led her to the washroom. There were two lights in the bathroom; one was white and bright, and the other was yellow and dim. In a hurry, I opened the dim light every time. But I wanted to open the bright one. Why could I not do such a simple thing well? Since then, the yellow and dim light, our stumbling steps, and my mother's constantly slipping body have formed a haunting montage, unreasonably fixed in my mind. During my period of mourning, if someone accidentally turned on that light, it would trigger a horrifying flashback, evoking an intense sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

Before long, my mother passed away in the hospital. When she was still conscious, her last words to me were: “Watch me.” In Chinese culture, “seeing parents off to their end” (*song zhong*) (qtd. in Chow 385) is a crucial practice through which children fulfill their filial duty. Her last wish turned out to be about me. Those two simple words transcended responsibility, social expectations, and the fear of the end, manifesting the deepest connection between a Chinese mother and daughter. It was her way of expressing her need and love for me. At last, I fulfilled my mother’s dying wish. Through long-term mental and physical exhaustion, death seemed a relief for both of us.

Conclusion

I now more deeply understand my mother as a mother and a woman. While motherhood studies have explored diverse perspectives—such as queer, adolescent, and Black mothering—motherhood and mothering in the contemporary Chinese context, along with the implications of maternal bereavement in the mother-daughter relationship, remain underexplored. This article used autoethnography and cultural analysis to examine how my mother’s mothering, romantic suffering, and terminal illness intertwined with my life as a daughter, shaping my attachment to and identification with her. Reflecting on personal experiences during China’s social transformation in the post-Mao era, this study argued that my mother’s identities as both a mother and a wife were constrained by the tension between traditional Confucian family values and contemporary revolutionary ideologies, leading to her maternal ambivalence and prolonged emotional distress. Through shared trauma and the transmission of attachment styles, my grief over her illness and eventual death became complex, reflecting a desire for a continuous bond and mutual identity.

As a single case study, this research is shaped by my perspective as a daughter. By emphasizing the intersection of personal narrative and cultural analysis, this study contributes to understanding maternal ambivalence in patriarchal societies and the enduring bonds in mother-daughter relationships, offering a path towards self-healing and awareness. Furthermore, it challenges the psychoanalytical focus on early-child separation by reframing the mother-daughter relationship as a continuous and evolving dynamic, extending into adulthood and bereavement. This research also lays a foundation for my future exploration of mother-daughter relationships in contemporary artwork, fostering a more empathetic understanding of daughter artists’ emotions and motives in depicting their deceased mothers and uncovering the psychic structures of both mothers and adult daughters.

Endnotes

1. The crude divorce rate is the number of divorces per one thousand residents that year. In 1994, four per one thousand people divorced in the United States and 2.7 per one thousand people in the United Kingdom. Data source: OWID based on UN, OECD, Eurostat and other sources. (Ortiz-Ospina and Roser)
2. Quote from my mother's diary, translated by the author. Diary of the author's mother, June and August 2006, days unknown.

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Natality as a Philosophy of Rebirth through the Acts of Mothering and Artistic Production

This article presents the concept of “natality” as a philosophy about how people go through new beginnings or rebirths during their lives, focussing especially on how mothers are socially and symbolically reborn anew when they have children. When they are born or adopted, children make a profound and transformational impact on the lives of their mothers. Having a child entails a rebirth of the self for mothers. However, mothers also go through multiple rebirths as they and their families grow, age, and change. All women (and others identifying as mothers) go through a rite of passage when they become mothers, which is socially recognized and transforms their identities to that of mothers. More broadly, natality refers to a metaphysics of rebirth in the human experience. People change in many ways; thus, rebirth is a part of what it is to exist.

*Beginning as a philosophical examination of the concept of natality as explored most famously in the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, this article is also a personal reflection, revealing how natality, birth, and rebirth emerged in my own life and work after I became a mother. For me, natality as rebirth has culminated in intellectual, philosophical, and artistic production—most recently, in my creation of *Rebirth Tunnels*, which are immersive matricentric art installations that participants move through to reach symbolic rebirth.*

Introduction

This article explores how natality, a concept coined most famously in the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, emerges as a philosophy of rebirth through the experiences of motherhood and matricentric art. The article begins by examining theories of natality, birth, and rebirth in the philosophies of Hannah Arendt, Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, and in the philosophical field of social ontology, ultimately explaining natality as a philosophy

of rebirth in how mothers are socially and symbolically reborn and begin anew when they have children. Moving into a discussion of natality and rebirth through matricentric experience and creative production, the article then examines the phenomenon of artists who describe a sense of renewal, both in themselves and in their artwork, after having become mothers. Part a personal reflection, I explore an additional form of rebirth that may emerge for some mothers through their maternal experiences and through art, which pertains to how they look back and come to understand both their childhoods and their adult selves. In my case, mothering and art affected how I processed inter-generational trauma, resulting in a rebirth of the self both through the acts of mothering my two children and through the creation of a new artwork called the *Rebirth Tunnel Immersive Art Installation* project. The installation, exhibited in various locations, provides a space for participants to reach symbolic rebirth in their lives.

Theories of Natality, Birth, and Rebirth

In *The Human Condition*, twentieth-century German American political philosopher Hannah Arendt explains that the human condition of natality is connected to how “newcomers,” or those born into the world as strangers, possess “the capacity of beginning something anew” (9). Arendt’s concept of natality relates to a human capacity to act in the world, especially in the political sense of acting and speaking through which one’s identity is revealed (179). Neither mothers nor mothering is central to Arendt’s work. Arendt’s discussion of physiological birth is referenced in terms of the labour and work of a woman’s body (30), and fertility is similarly referred to in the context of “animal laborans,” or that mode of existence in which humans are like beasts and must produce and labour through the routines of life (112, 122).

Arendt also examines a “second birth” in the human experience, which she understands as available to humans through action and speech and word and deed. This second birth is not so much a rebirth as it is a new birth of a different part of the self:

With word and deed, we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity ... its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. (176–77).

For Arendt, it is through speech and action that humans go through a second birth. Speech and action are distinguished from human bodily existence; the

latter is related to physical objects and takes on a lesser status in her philosophy (176).

In her extensive work on Arendt, however, contemporary Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero extends the Arendtian concept of natality into the realms of the body and the maternal. Looking at material from Arendt's German notebooks, for example, Cavarero points to Arendt's discussion of the "rift of copulation and birth," with copulation in Cavarero's interpretation indicating a fundamental rupture and subsequent birth and coming into being through the woman's body. Cavarero states: "No-one of us would be in the world—or, as Arendt would have it, would have *appeared* into the world—if a woman's body had not experienced a 'rupture' in the act of giving birth, as part of the natural cycle of regeneration, that is, of the necessity of organic life" (236–37). Cavarero's exploration of Arendt's philosophy of natality concerning physiological birth and the maternal body is appealing. But this concept of natality and the maternal life also expands past begetting children and into the sphere of what it is to raise them. Natality in the maternal sense could also be an existential state whereby mothers transform and are reborn on multiple levels through mothering. After birth or adoption, mothers go through a transformation that is of a social ontological nature.

I have written at length about social ontology; it was central to the thesis of my first book, *Imagery, Ritual, and Birth: Ontology Between the Sacred and the Secular* (2018). Social ontology pertains to the social nature of something or someone's being. To give a common example from the field of social ontology, money has a social ontology, which fundamentally pertains to its social meaning and transcends its physical nature. In other words, on a physical level, money's ontology is related to its nature as a piece of paper or physical object. But at the social level, money's ontology is related to what humans construe it to be or mean. People collectively understand money not simply as a piece of paper but as a medium of exchange. This is money's social ontology.

Returning to birth and mothering, all women (and others identifying as mothers) go through a rite of passage when they become mothers, which is socially recognized and transforms their identities to that of mother. A social rebirth, therefore, happens at the onset of mothering, as mothers are socially and symbolically reborn and begin anew when they have children. When they are born or adopted, children make a profound and transformational impact on the lives of their mothers; thus, having a child entails a rebirth of the self for mothers. However, mothers also go through multiple rebirths as they and their families grow, age, and change. A mother's journey is never static; it is everchanging. Thus, there is a constant natality to a mother's existence—both in the everyday phenomenology of what it is to care for infants, children, teenagers, and even adult children, as well as in the new beginnings or becomings that happen for mothers in their bodies and psyches as they grow through

their experiences of motherhood.

Nativity and maternity merge in a mother's life, experience, and existence through her child's passage of developmental milestones, for example, which often become a mother's milestones in her psyche. Whether the milestone be that of smiling, laughing, crawling, eating solid food, walking or talking for the first time, going to school, driving a car, or any other of the myriads of milestones children go through—for many mothers, a rebirth of the self, sometimes big and sometimes small, takes place during these moments. Mothers grow in knowledge and capacity with each step their children take. When a child begins crawling, for example, a mother's reality shifts. There are countless other changes that children go through during their lives, all of which have some impact not only on their existences but on the existences of their mothers.

Nativity refers to a metaphysics of rebirth in the human experience about how people go through new beginnings or rebirths during their lives. People's beings change in many ways; thus, rebirth is a part of what it is to exist.

Rebirth through Matricentric Experience and Creative Production

Eminent Canadian scholar and professor Andrea O'Reilly has explored a mother-centred feminist theory and politics in her extensive work on matricentric feminism, including in her 2016 book, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* and her 2024 volume, *The Mother Wave: Matricentric Feminism as Theory, Activism and Practice*, among her other publications. Drawing from her work, some of my previous research has focussed on matricentric art, which explores birth and art about birth, not nativity and rebirth in the context of matricentric art. Yet some of my findings point to this exact phenomenon of rebirth in the maternal experience of the mother-artist. One area of interest to the research, for example, revolves around the finding of an increased artistic production and energy that some of the female artists studied report experiencing after becoming mothers. Canadian artist Kate Hansen, for example, explains how she and her artwork transformed after she became a mother and had children: "Contrary to the popular belief that art making is one of the things that falls to the wayside after the birth of children, in my case I felt inspired and compelled by my experience of childbirth and motherhood. It was almost as though the creative act of making another human being awoke a creative drive in me" (Hennessey, *Matricentric Art* 380).



Figure 1: *Krista and Colum*, conte crayon and goldleaf on paper. Copyright 2010, Kate Hansen, printed with permission.

What Hansen describes is a rebirth and renewal—a natality emerging both in her being and artwork after she became a mother. Nadya Burton, a sociologist and professor of midwifery, who edited the 2015 volume, *Natal Signs: Cultural Representations of Pregnancy, Birth and Parenting*, has also described “natal aesthetics,” which is a powerful way of creating change and envisioning the future (9).

This phenomenon of natality and rebirth through maternal life has emerged repeatedly, affecting my scholarship and artmaking on birth and rebirth. The physiological, psychological, social, and emotional transformations I went through after experiencing pregnancy, birth, and early mothering found an outlet and intellectual passage through my writing shortly after I had given birth to my first child.

Since the births of my son in 2009 and my daughter in 2011, I have written and presented for both academic and wider audiences about a range of topics centred on childbirth. Pregnancy, birth, and mothering, all physical dimensions of my life, revitalized my intellectual being. Birth, I have contended, while a topic of physical and physiological interest, is also one of philosophical and intellectual fascination (Hennessey “How Childbirth”). The wide range of topics I have worked on has included studies on pregnancy, birth, and mothering in philosophy, art, religious studies, and other areas of the humanities, as well as in neuroscience and inclusive of both western and nonwestern traditions.

In 2010, I founded the website Visualizing Birth (visualizingbirth.org) while pregnant with my second child. The website is an archive containing over two hundred pages of images, videos, and stories to use in birth as a rite of passage. In 2019, another mother and I cofounded the San Francisco Birth Circle (sfbirthcircle.org), a community group for low-income families in San Francisco. At the end of 2023, I founded the Society for the Study of Pregnancy and Birth (ssprb.org), an academic hub for those who study birth in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and psychology.

My experiences as a mother have served as the main catalyst behind these projects, and this production of written material and other projects related to birth has been prolific. It has not occurred in a cerebral vacuum, rising to the surface of my thoughts and being instead as part of my embodied experience as a mother. Like the phenomenon artist Kate Hansen describes, which pertains to a growth in her creative drive after she had become a mother, I have been filled with new energy ever since the births of my children.

Mothering, however, entails a large amount of carework and can be exhausting. Hansen explains how even considering the amount of work mothering made her responsible for, she could still find time for her artmaking. Parenting affected her organization of time: “I also found that the time limitations involved in caring for an infant forced me to be more disciplined in my art making. I would eke out hours here and there when my son was sleeping to continue my portraits” (Hennessey, *Matricentric Art* 381). This reorganization of time after becoming a mother is familiar to me. While I could not have produced as I did without the help of my husband, especially when our children were very young, I also learned to work differently after becoming a mother: optimizing time and accessing a new way of working.

A recent development in my work inspired by this mothering experience has emerged in artmaking around rebirth. This new project stems from years of researching birth, rebirth, and my personal rebirth experience, which took place outside of the academic sphere. The specific art project I have been working on, *Rebirth Tunnel*, is an immersive art installation that people walk through. A recipient of an American Academy of Religion (AAR) grant,

I used the grant funds to create a *Rebirth Tunnel* installation in Las Vegas, Nevada, at a March 2024 regional conference of the AAR. Two nonprofits in San Francisco have since awarded funds to create a different installation in San Francisco, and most recently, the Henry Luce Foundation has also awarded a grant for further development of the project.

Much of my earlier scholarship, including my first book, focussed on art and birth as a rite of passage; the *Rebirth Tunnel*, however, represents a shift in focus on physiological birth, as well as mothering in all forms, to symbolic rebirth for all. Many participants who completed the 2024 *Rebirth Tunnel* in Las Vegas reported a sense of renewal upon completion. For some, the experience was emotional. There was a diverse range of participants across gender, race, and age, and I have begun recording individual responses of their experiences on the *Rebirth Tunnel* webpage.

Participants begin their rebirth experience in the installation by processing the self in a reconception pod before entering the tunnel. Alone in the pod, they write statements on paper, either about something they would like to shed from themselves—most often a memory—or about a hope for the future. At the middle arch and centre of the tunnel, they encounter a rebirth box, an object integral to the rebirth experience because it is where the participants read their written statements and then discard them. While moving through the tunnel, they also hear verbal affirmations of love played through recordings, and they see a projection of an animated image of a child who looks off into a peaceful valley. Upon completion of the tunnel, participants receive rebirth certificates, which they sign themselves, which helps them to be present with their name and self as the ritual ends.

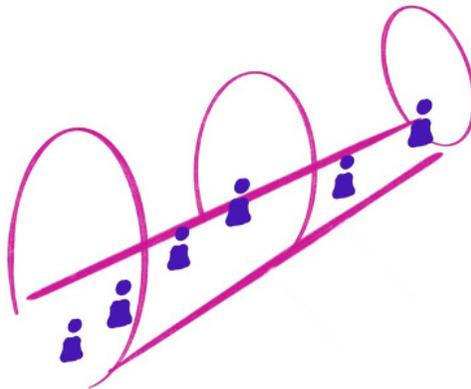


Figure 2: *The Rebirth Tunnel*, graphic design on 2024 program of the American Academy of Religion, Western Region, Montserrat Batchelli-Hennessey, copyright 2023, printed with permission.

The idea for the project began emerging organically as a product of the intellectual work I had been doing for years and a personal rebirth experience I went through with my children in the summer of 2022.

Following the publication of my first book in 2018, I began looking at birth and pregnancy in their abstract or symbolic forms. Of special interest to me at that time were ways in which art about birth or rebirth after trauma is often therapeutic for individuals and communities, helping them to rebirth themselves in the wake of hardship. I looked at this phenomenon most closely in the context of Catalonia, Spain, in part because my husband Toni is Catalan, and we are close to our Catalan family, community, and culture.

Modern and contemporary artists in Catalonia have over the past century used themes of birth as a material means of rebirthing both their own identities and Catalan cultural identity more broadly, not only following the events in which they have lived, including in some cases the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), and in all cases the devastating dictatorship of Francisco Franco (ended in 1975 upon Franco's death), but also in the wake of Catalonia's long history as a nation without a state in Europe. Birth is an overlooked topic within the arts and humanities, but in modern and contemporary Catalan art, it is easy to find if one looks for it. The topic, which can pertain to physiological birth or more broadly to cosmogony, genesis, and rebirth, is ever-present in the works of Catalan modernists, surrealists, and contemporary artists (Hennessey, "A Philosophy" 1–15). In a work such as Joan Miró's 1925 painting *The Birth of the World*, for example, we see a new world rise from the dust and remnants of a former place.

Parallel to this research on Catalan art, I also began looking at rebirth and the "eternal return" as they occur in the philosophy and history of religion, including in the thoughts and writings of Albert Camus, Mircea Eliade, and Friedrich Nietzsche. I interpreted the Catalan artworks of my study as physical representations of rebirth that relate in part to a longstanding Catalan sentiment of an eternal return to life, community, and identity after cultural trauma.

More broadly, I explored how this concept of rebirth emerges in different religions and traditions. Across history and time, different peoples and cultures have expressed an interest in the eternal return, focussing on cyclical patterns of physical or spiritual rebirth, life after death in a celestial or nonterrestrial world, an eternity of recurring histories, or a repetitiveness within the human lifespan. Themes of rebirth exist in a wide variety of cultural contexts, including those of the Ancient Egyptians, Aztecs, Buddhists, Chinese Daoists, Christians, Hindus, Native Americans, and the Norse.

In the context of Catalan art, I found that following the devastating events of war and dictatorship in their lives, the artists of my study had successfully rebirthed themselves and their sense of Catalan culture through the material form of their art.



Figure 3. *The Birth of the World*, oil on canvas, 1925. Catalan artist Joan Miró, Image in the Public Domain.

Rebirth after Trauma through Art and the Maternal Experience

Midwife and artist Jeanne Lyons writes, “Art making and birth giving have enormous potential to reveal beauty born of deep authenticity and truth. Both have the potential to be transformational and involve working with forces that can be perceived as ‘larger than oneself’ and at the same time as being extremely personal in how they work through any individual” (233). Similarly, artmaking and rebirth have great potential in helping individuals and larger communities to transform, particularly after trauma.

A form of rebirth that emerges for some mothers through their maternal experiences is a new vision in how they look back and understand their childhoods, which in turn helps them to understand their adult selves. When a mother’s child turns six years old, for example, she may remember her own life from when she was six years old, suddenly viewing it differently than she had before the time in her life when she was a mother.

A mother may not have experienced an optimal childhood, yet her mothering may serve a reparative function, healing her connections to her childhood and how she was raised. Providing her child with the nurturing she did not receive from her family when she was young can heal the wounds carried by her inner child. These realizations of the mother are also beneficial to the child, who may receive love and understanding once the intergenerational transfer of trauma from mother to child has been broken. Studies have shown that unresolved childhood trauma can harm a mother’s ability to develop attachment with her children; thus, part of the process of resolving one’s trauma also necessarily takes place outside the sphere of parenting (Iyengar et al.).

The birth of my first child and my rite of passage as a new mother kickstarted a cathartic rebirth process that led to my current life and work. During the period of researching rebirth after trauma in the context of Catalan art and culture more broadly, I was also going through a personal transformation and rebirth that was connected to my experiences of being a mother in the present and having been a child in the past. My childhood was marked by deep instability and dysfunction. By age twelve, I had lived under twelve different roofs in four states across the United States and one year in Asia. Alcohol was ever-present in the home throughout my childhood, as were a wide range of people who came in and out of my life, some disappearing and never to be seen again after another relocation. Unfortunately, due to these life circumstances, I endured various types of abuse from a young age. Scapegoating was also prevalent in the family. As the eldest child and only daughter in a patriarchal Irish American home, I became the primary target.

Years later, after maltreatment following the birth of my first child, which was particularly egregious, I reached out to specialists for advice on how I had been raised. This began a process through which I revisited my past and

learned how to mother my inner child, a child who had been parentified at a young age and never really mothered or parented herself. Fortunately, it was through the lens of motherhood that I could see how intergenerational patterns of trauma and abuse had affected my life, enabling me to stop the pattern from continuing.

These personal details became woven with my work on rebirth, which then merged with a serendipitous and makeshift rite of passage with my children. The rite of passage happened in the summer of 2022 when I took the children to Ireland for a short trip while my husband spent time with his parents in Catalonia. Most of my ancestors are from Ireland, and I had been there a few times, although this was the first trip for my children, who were at that time eleven and thirteen. We went to one of the places from where I knew our ancestors had come, an area full of peat bogs called Turraun, about an hour and a half from Dublin in County Offaly. On the flight over to Ireland with my kids, however, I suddenly found myself questioning why I was going to the place of my ancestors when my family of origin had created deep pain for me in my life. It was then that I realized how my children and I needed to say goodbye to them in some way.

I thought of a material way to commemorate the moment, and on the second day of our trip, we took a piece of paper with writing about the family to the banks of the River Shannon. The children and I stood in a ring, holding hands. I said words that acknowledged some of what I had been through as a child and adult but also wished the family well in this world. We then said goodbye to them and ripped up the paper together. The three of us buried the pieces in the mud on the riverbank.

The ceremony did not last very long, just a few minutes, and I did not expect much from it. But I began to feel a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. Upon our return to Catalonia, I was light and free. As weeks and months went by, I realized something fundamental had happened that day by the River Shannon: I had gone through a personal rebirth. My children have since then commented on the ceremony at various points, indicating a sense of closure with family they never knew or knew very little, as well as with a reconnection to their Irish heritage. My son has become a gifted bagpipe player, and my daughter is an Irish dancer. Both children have performed in San Francisco's St. Patrick's Day parade.

This story, which is one of natality as rebirth in my own life, is intimately connected to the creation of the *Rebirth Tunnel* installation and is a part of the psychological fabric of which the artwork is made. The act of ripping or discarding paper, which symbolizes metabolization of the self and moving forwards, stems from how my children and I had ripped paper and buried it by the River Shannon together during our ceremony in 2022. The idea of creating an art piece through which to be rebirthed stems from studying how other

artists had rebirthed themselves and their cultures through their creations.

After the process of rebirth with my children, I realized that other communities could benefit from an immersive space through which to process life events, particularly events of a traumatic nature that had affected them personally or were part of something broader; thus, the *Rebirth Tunnel* installation was born.

Gina Wong-Wylie describes the term “motherline” as “a feminist, maternal genealogy of knowledge and wisdom handed down from mother to daughter through generations,” which “can be warped and severed by the grand narratives of a particular culture” (140). Wong-Wylie, a psychologist and professor whose private practice supports women through maternal transitions, is influenced by both Alice Walker, who introduced the term “motherline” in her 1982 essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” and Sara Ruddick, who further developed the concept in her 1989 book *Maternal Thinking*. Inspired also by Adrienne Rich’s discussion of “matrophobia,” which relates to our fear of turning into our mother, Wong-Wylie introduces the term “matro-reform,” defining it as, “an act, desire, and process of claiming motherhood power ... a progressive movement to mothering that attempts to institute new mothering rules and practices apart from one’s motherline” (142).

Through Wong-Wylie’s work, including her personal stories by way of photographic images, she went through her process of matroreform and mothering apart from her motherline during pregnancy and mothering. My case of mothering apart from my motherline has been similar, involving artistic and intellectual production, as well as personal story, and resulting in an intergenerational and personal rebirth.

Conclusion: Natality, Rebirth, and Art in Existential Renewal

Most of us go through multiple rebirths during our lives. Birth, like death, is a universally shared human experience. Yet our lives and existences are ever-changing and not static after birth. We are reborn in many ways throughout our lives, sometimes regularly and other times during important, pivotal periods of growth and transformation. Going through these new beginnings or rebirths during our lives makes us natal creatures, not mortal ones. Especially after change or tumult, a ceremony, ritual, rite of passage, or physical event can help to actualize a person’s rebirth. In the case of mothers, they are reborn and begin anew when they have children. Not only do they go through a rite of passage when they become mothers, they also go through multiple rebirths during their own lives and their children’s.

In my case, there has been a material and artistic output, which stems from life mothering my children. Motherhood was the catalyst for multiple rebirths in my life, which have involved physical, psychological, emotional, communal,

and other transformations in my person. A physical and embodied manifestation of how these changes have been processed in my own life, the *Rebirth Tunnel* installation is ultimately a new form of natality along the path of my existence.

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Maternal Conversations in Paper, Drawing, and Poetry: A Changing Mother-Child “Us”

*As a small arts-based inquiry, this article speaks to the production of a collage that prompted a poem exploring mothering transitions as a child becomes an adult. The intense relational changes alive within the mother-child “us” (Moy, *An Arts* 134) are amplified in these artworks to approach sense-making differently. A maternal experience of privilege, unknowing and awe unfurls within the changing mother-child “us”. This is contextualized within a new materialist ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad 185) and the expansive field of mothering studies.*

Researching mothers’ experiences of holding their children across the lifespan and working therapeutically with mothers and mothering experiences of my own drew my attention to the intensive relational changes alive within what I call the mother-child “us” (Moy, *An Arts* 183; Moy, “A Walk of”). The “us,” which is neither a merging nor a diminishment of mother or infant, speaks to a strange sense of expansion across bodies, space, and time that can be experienced during pleasurable moments of mother-child intimacy. The “us” provides a felt glimpse into a fundamental relationality.

Inhabiting an arts-based professional world, I find that its underlying work values, practices, and conceptualizations regularly exceed their place, spilling randomly into my personal life. With my son approaching adulthood (and becoming an adult during the making of this work), my hands gravitate to old magazines and scraps of paper with urgent questions about our relational identity now. This work has produced a collage (Figure 1), which also resulted in the poem “homes.”

I employ a multimodal arts and emergent inquiry approach (Lett 27) across my various living contexts. This approach may conjure notions of intellectual doings in the professional realm and affective bodily doings in domestic spaces as if these spaces could be separated. A new materialist or posthumanist

worldview interrupts the distance between the two, instead exploring how the discursive and material, the cultural and natural, and the present, past, and future are wildly entangled (Barad 28; Braidotti *Posthuman Knowledge* 47; Haraway 13). I experience this entangling in real-time and colour as I try to explore an elusive and inarticulate shifting in my relationship with my son while next door the young twins protest their bathtime. The infants' noise takes me out of my forward thinking and back to my warm new son held carefully in his little bath. In those moments, in that holding, we were more than mother and son; we were fleetingly an "us." What intrigues me is that while this kind of holding has changed—I see less of my growing son and hear even less about his world—the feeling of "us" remains. This "us" is relationally active, agitating, awesome, and not quite known.

I invite you to engage with this article in any order. You might like to linger with some of the conceptual, practical, or contextual agencies at play in constructing the collage and poem. Or you might prefer to spend time with the artwork alone. However you choose to approach this work, I hope that you'll lean into sensing the strange relational experience of a mother-child "us"—the "us" of my son and me or the "us" of you and the many other possible "us" experiences alive in your world as a child or mother.

New Materialism and an Ethico-Onto-Epistemology: Holding the Inquiry

New materialism is a term that loosely gathers diverse approaches to being, becoming, and knowing that nevertheless have significant understandings in common (Sanzo par. 1). Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin note that the new materialist movement "traverses and thereby rewrites thinking *as a whole* ... redirecting every possible idea according to its new sense of orientation" (13). This is well captured in Karen Barad's concept of an "ethico-onto-epistemology" (185). For Barad, being and knowing are fundamentally entangled. As such, when we consider cultural or discursive practices like language, aesthetic representation, and politics, we are producing realities instantaneously. There is an entangling of discourse and matter that sees language, writing, artmaking, and conceptualization, for example, as matterings—that is, material acts with material consequences. This idea has been partially explored in postmodern social constructionist feminism (Hekman) with meaningful gains in our political understanding and activism in feminist, LGBTQIA+ and antiracist movements. However, Barad troubles the hierarchical binaries between meaning and matter, mind and body, human and nonhuman, culture, and nature (185) by removing culture from its privileged position in postmodern approaches. If we accept the claim, for example, that motherhood is an institution serving patriarchal and capitalist desires (Rich), it shapes how we understand motherhood (an epistemology) and what we agree is real and possible for mothers (an ontology). Knowing comes to matter.

Conversely, embracing an ethico-onto-epistemology means that material realities—such as the kind of food, shelter, financial stability, transport, health, and education a mother has access to—construct what they come to know and imagine is possible of mothering. The consequence of such a radically entwined ontology and epistemology is that every act of knowing is an act of being and becoming and therefore an ethical doing (Barad 185).

Another aspect of new materialist thought relevant to this article is the contention that “matter is produced and productive, generated and generative ... [it] is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things” (Barad 137). Materiality is taken seriously in this approach, and I, as a human, interact with the more-than-human in mutually agentive ways. For example, the materiality of the houses and hands on the collage, the paper, scissors, and adhesive, as well as the table I worked with and the lighting in the room, produce a collage that, in turn, can matter. Barad’s “intra-action” describes the entangling of multiple phenomena to produce agency—in this case, the agential collage. This collage can do things; agency does not remain with the artist. The agencies that intra-acted to produce the collage are human but also include the more-than-human. Consonant with Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, I recognize that these material more-than-human agencies oriented me as much as I oriented them (3). We engage in a cocreative intra-action to produce what unfolds now on the page (or screen).

With the term “posthuman,” Rosi Braidotti passionately shifts our conceptual grounding from the “centrality of the human—as Man and as *Anthropos* ... the old dualities” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 8) to experiencing and becoming “materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 11). This resituating of human agency within multiple relationalities picks up again on a new materialist intra-active ontology, which speaks powerfully to my conceptualization, experience, and practice of a mother-child “us.”

Intimate moments with my son have consistently materialized a felt experience of an expansive, more than mother and child identity. Our moments of loving holding have dissolved the binaries of self and other and provided a glimpse into our relational becoming as “us” across space, place, and time (Moy, “A Walk of”). This does not refuse or obscure the many other experiences of self across multiple other relationships, including relationships with other humans and the more-than-human. For example, my son has a living and durational experience of self-with-camera that is not fully knowable to me, as he inhabits another entangling of relationalities as a photographer. Knowing and ethics are viscerally active in the relational mother-child “us” without collapsing a generative awareness of difference—within our evolving “us,” between our “us,” and the many other possible relationships we may inhabit.

The Importance of the Gerund: Creative Explorations in Mothering

Mothering is a relational unfolding of tangible, daily importance for me, as it entangles with my doing, thinking, feeling, sensing, hoping, fearing, and making. It did not start well. Experiencing a brutal and debilitating postnatal depression (Moy, “Experiencing” 32), the only book I had access to at the time was Brooke Shields’s *Down Came the Rain: My Journey through Postpartum Depression*. That more-than-human agency was a lifeline, an umbilical cord to another mother’s voice in the absence of my mother. Mothering erupted my sense of self, place, and time and alerted me to the extraordinary load motherhood as an institution (Rich) placed upon those who mother across personal, familial, social, cultural, and historical dimensions.

The chaos, despair and possibility I experienced as a new mother are powerfully evoked in Lisa Baraitser’s writing on “interrupted” maternal subjectivities (67). My sense of sovereign being was irrevocably interrupted by fragmented and minimal sleep, breastfeeding, hormonal fluctuations, altered practices across domestic and professional spheres, and the frequent experience of responding to the needs of my infant. These interruptions produced a tangibly different way of being with and in the world. As becoming a mother “with all her multiplicities and intensities” (Baraitser 158), my formerly agential “I” became a fluctuating subjectivity of “viscosity” but also “heightened sentience” (Baraitser 4). Regularly interrupted, I experienced beyond a single self to think, feel, act, and sense from a startlingly different subjectivity: the relational “us.”

As we emerged from those early months of newness and strange relational configurations, I progressively explored—from a place of intense need—many artistic and academic voices that agitated and enriched my vision of mothering. I examined and remade my experiences through maternal lenses touching on Donald Winnicott’s “good enough” mother/ing; Abigail Palko and Andrea O’Reilly’s “monstrous mother/ing”; Lisa Marchiano’s “dark mother/ing”; Sharon Hays’s “intensive mother/ing”; Erich Neumann’s “archetypal Great Mother/ing”; and my mothering from an “us” standpoint. In *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood*, Hettie Judah writes of the different uses and imaginaries of motherhood through Western history, including depictions speaking to mothers as sensuous, virtuous, happy, fallen, political, anxious, working, racialized, and sexualized (47–80). In the artworks offered to amplify these uses, I see my maternal entanglements leaning towards and resisting multiple prescriptions and images of mothering. At times, these have been generative and at others, painfully reductive.

As the internet became more accessible, I discovered the books and articles of Demeter Press (founded a year before my son was born in 2006) and purchased O’Reilly’s *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* published a year after

my son was born. These were accompanied by mothering blogs, books and articles, Instagram reels, advertising, and deep dives into such topics as third-wave feminism, maternal health campaigns, John Bowlby's attachment theory, and O'Reilly's matricentric feminism. Tatjana Takševa writes that matricentric feminism develops through a "critical consciousness allowing those who mother to achieve greater degrees of autonomy, agency, and authenticity in their motherwork" (191). In my therapeutic practice, lived experience, and research, motherwork emerges from and returns to a particular relational mother-child "us" that continues to evolve in intra-actions with cultural and material more-than-human agencies.

Over the last eighteen years, I have attempted to make sense of conflicting, fascinating, impenetrable, hopeful, and blatantly manipulative and enticing images of mothering through drawing, collage, and writing. The collage I created in this article is indebted to the many voices and images celebrating and rejecting my mothering, offering respite, meaning, disruptions, and challenges.

Exploring matrescence, Lucy Jones reflects on quantum entanglement, the same phenomenon that inspired Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology. She writes: "Quantum entanglement involves two or more particles becoming connected to each other in such a way that their properties cannot be described individually anymore" (220). This speaks to the strange, frequent, and fleeting experience of the mother-child "us" perspective that emerged from my research on maternal holding. I cannot refer to my son without the lens of my mothering; my son cannot refer to me without the lens of his "childing." I can speak and conceptualize the many other worlds we inhabit separately from our relationship, but I cannot describe us as a mother or child individually anymore. We are entangled in this unique relationship without diminishing our many other relationships. Art has helped me understand that.

Stories—visual, spoken, written—are where I find myself and our mother-child "us" most alive so, I have offered two kinds of stories here. These are invitations rather than representations—an act I find impossible now. Experiences and agencies (like the phenomenon of my 'self') are dynamic and relational unfoldings that resist representation (Vannini 1) in a new materialist worldview. As Angela Garbes writes: "I see the unfurling of tissue and viscera, the way our placenta, unravelled, would occupy miles of space ... we're unfolding, always. It's a dialogue that will last a lifetime, maybe longer" (231). It is a conversation that has never been static and never will be.

Collage as Inquiry

Along with many artists who work with visual possibilities, I sensed myself slipping outwards, incorporating and being incorporated by the materials, which could only find expression in the collage. As Erin Manning writes, “The medieval definition of art $\frac{3}{4}$ defined as ‘the way,’ ‘the manner’ (locates) art not at the level of finished object but in its trajectory” (53). I stay with the stream of many creative possible trajectories worlding different worlds (Haraway 58). This is a mattering entangled with the more-than-human that is porous and populated with “productive zig zagging” (Braidotti, “Posthuman” 8) and unexpected outcomes. I cannot take charge.

The choice to collage as inquiry was prompted by its ability to “address complex intersections, work simultaneously with varied data, allow for contradictions, and reconfigure knowledges and norms” (Rijke 305). Like my experience of mothering as a strange expansion of subjectivities, I needed a medium that could incorporate different imagery and media to stay with the vast and complex not knowing of maternal love.

I wanted to explore, in relationship with materials, those things that were felt, subterranean, and not yet amenable to words, consonant with Victoria Scotti and Nancy Gerber’s exploration of the “beyond words” phenomena experienced by first-time mothers (1). I trusted that multimodal arts exploration would, for example, concretize “abstract content or statement(s) into a tangible form that can be physically perceived, experienced, and related to” (Witte et al. 17). I understood that the artwork would be capable of holding multiple and evolving meanings (Leavy 27). I knew from experience that attending to the process of making would bring relationalities and textures into my awareness, enriching the work’s generativity (Woodford 142).

I selected each material and shape by paying attention to my embodied experience and leaning into the relationalities of the moment through sensorial, haptic, kinaesthetic, and affective affordances. Les Todres notes that the body “inhabits situations intimately” (20). It is a source of Eugene Gendlin’s “felt sense”—a “single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling” (33) of the present moment. If we give ourselves space to attend to our felt sensing at the moment, we can form something in multiple modalities, generating sense-making, insight, significance, or meaning. We can move something from inchoate human and more-than-human intra-actions into a shareable and expressive form. I listened for a felt sense of rightness as it moved along my arms, the scissors, the pencil, paper, magazines, and the collage base.

Collage as inquiry was also embraced because of its enormous capacity to “uncover the problems themselves, suggestive of a ‘readiness’ for emergent learning and knowing” (Rijke 305). I did not know the question to ask about the changes in our mother-child relationship; I only had a feeling of needing

to find out more. As Jerry Rosiek notes, “The practice of art involves the cultivation of a receptivity to a phenomenon or an experience which brings with it a condition of vulnerability to being changed by it” (640). That ability to invite, support, and agitate for a change of being and knowing is part of the client’s and researcher’s process in arts-based fields of inquiry.

Some of the collaged houses are built of memories as they arise in the present, and some are built of desire. I do not know whether the hands reach towards or away from one another in this two-dimensional space. I do know that my son and I are “only one of many forces that compose the distributed agency of an event” (Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* 134), the event of mothering and “childing” on the brink of adulting. This relational unfolding reaches into the past and the future. As Christina Sharpe writes, “I learned to see in my mother’s house. I learned how not to see in my mother’s house. How to limit my sight to the things that could be controlled” (85). I imagine my mother’s house where I might have learned if we had shared a roof longer than my first eighteen months. I consider the absence of that house and what it has taught me, and I encounter the house I mother in now as an invitation and a limitation for myself and my son.

Bringing words to the collage is another zigzag on this journey of sense-making, getting lost, inviting, and being invited by materials to make and be differently. The process is hard to shape in words, perhaps because it acknowledges the ongoing process of becoming a mother. Nora Bateson’s description of aphanipoiesis meets this experiencing generatively: “The idea of a constant coalescing of perceptions and experiences that are not distinguished from one another but rather form a hum or a resonance of meaning-making into which a new sensation or idea lands” (173). My poem “homes” brings linguistic shape to the hum, alive with new sensations and ideas.

Poetry is an act of remembrance and creation that takes up only a little space, considering the potential power of its presence. I can form a poem in fragments of time, and I can offer it to you without asking for hours of your day. It is an art modality respectful of the discombobulating interruptions and elongations of mothering. As Audre Lorde writes, poetry “is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labour, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper” (97). Yet “poetry is not a luxury” (7); it is a form of survival, strength, courage, articulation, dream, and risk.

Through collage and poetry, I become, for a moment, intelligible to myself. Bayo Akomolafe evocatively writes: “Intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming” (379–80). This world of our mother-child “us” has many ecosystems, homes, temporalities, spatialities, hands, and pearls. Some of these I know, and many lie just across the threshold of a house we have not yet lived in.



Figure 1. Ariel Moy, *A Homing Instinct*, 2024, Mixed media collage, 11.7 x 16.5 inches.

homes

It took longer
For the infant hand
Drawn with lead pencil for night
To meet the collage.

Layered carefully,
On a magazine Milky Way,
Each imagined fingerprint,
Traces Nan's old pearls.

Mother and child,
Housed uncomfortably,
in the infrastructure,
of identities.

I was too fragmented to even
silhouette a home.
Wayward memories puffed up,
And spiked certainty.

Now here shaped and taped,
on an expanse of white,
A mama less than archival,
But making space, place, duration.

We are imperfectly seeded,
many actions and cycles before,
Always exceeding ourselves,
Lingering michrochimerisms, DNA.

Sweet and sour infancies,
Ghosed as we grow.
Now ginger buds through floorboards,
Scent histories over tea.

Drop-offs and pick-ups,
Ruptures and repairs,
as the traffic lights relinquish their,
red and orange to a green glass, go.

A parliament of doings,
Now stretched in multiverse,
meeting and loosening,
no promises given.

I can't hold this smoke
undulating or noxious
carbon and particulate misting
Into a dim unknown.

Textures of "us"
Sprout and decay,
A false mitosis as we become,
Wide and gliding.

I want soft landings
For you, atmospheres,
Spiced for making kin,
Simmering possibility.

Gazing through the window,
When the visit is over.
Resisting the cold cups,
Unlearning the past.

Our “us” is,
straw, wood, and brick,
Microbial matterings,
More-than Polaroids.

On A3 canvases,
I map artifacts of you,
but you tear these anchored portraits,
And I am fierce with awe.

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Reburial of the Mother and the Horror of the Feminine in Southern Gothic Fiction

*This article focuses on the portrayal of women, especially mothers, in the works of Southern gothic authors Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite, and Charlaine Harris. The works of Rice and Brite imagine the South as a white, male-coded space. Nonetheless, a few strong female characters in their works challenge the patriarchal order but end up paying with their lives. Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* presents strong nonwhite matriarchs and excavates matrilineal lineages only to rebury them in favour of white patriarchs and patriarchal heritages. In Brite's *Lost Souls*, in contrast, independent young women who express their sexuality are deemed promiscuous and punished with unwanted pregnancies and death at childbirth. Charlaine Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* has a female protagonist, Sookie. However, in this series, too, Adele, the matriarch, is killed early, and more importance is given to the patrilineal heritage. Another young mother, Crystal, meets the same fate as the women in Brite's novel. All the mothers who die in the works of these authors allow for the mixing of races. This article argues that although these authors give strong women a voice and place, they do so only to take the agency away from the women in favour of a patriarchal order. These works display matrophobia, a fear of becoming one's mother and of motherhood. Moreover, matrophobia is used to instill fear of miscegenation, control women's reproductive function, and preserve gender and racial divisions.*

Introduction

The works of Southern gothic authors Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite (William Joseph/Billy Martin),¹ and Charlaine Harris have been celebrated for using gothic conventions for socially progressive purposes. Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976–2018) and Brite's gothic horror novels: *Lost Souls* (1992), *Drawing Blood* (1993), *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), and *The Crow: The Lazarus*

Heart (1998) were appreciated by audiences and critics alike for their representation of queer individuals and relationships when there were few such representations in mainstream literature. Although Rice and Brite give voice to one marginalized group, they also silence another one. The few women characters appear in their novels, those that do, die gruesome deaths. In contrast, Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–2013) is iconic for its strong female protagonist, Sookie Stackhouse. However, women, especially mothers, are silenced in this series as well. These authors imagine the South as primarily a white, male-coded space. Their works include some strong female characters and matriarchs and unearth matrilineal kinships and multiracial lineages, like Akasha's vampire progeny and Maharet's Great Family, which include humans and vampires alike in *The Vampire Chronicles*, and Sookie's grandmother Adele Stackhouse's supernatural legacy in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*. By doing so, they momentarily challenge the traditional preference for the patrilineal lineage and patriarchal order. However, even as these texts engage with matriarchs and matrilineal kinships, they often do so to reestablish the normative white supremacist patriarchal order. The appearance of strong women and mothers in these works, who freely exercise their social, political, and sexual rights, do not encourage other women to emulate them but serve as cautionary tales against behaviour that should be avoided. Men continue to exercise control over the bodies of these women through the institution of motherhood, judge them as good or bad, and use pregnancy and death as punishment for their self-expression. These works use matrophobia, or the fear of ending up like one's mother, to caution women against self-expression, sexual freedom, and, most importantly, miscegenation. Both gender and race are social constructs; race, like motherhood, also serves patriarchy. Women's stories, spaces, and matri-lineal kinships and legacies often reemerge in the Southern gothic works of authors like Rice, Brite, and Harris but only for a final reburial.

Rice, Brite, and Harris were born in the South in 1941, 1967, and 1951, respectively. Rice and Brite were born in Louisiana, and Harris was born in Mississippi. They either grew up or began their writing careers during the second wave of feminism when women were fighting for equal pay for equal work, access to birth control, the right to abortion, and the end of gender discrimination. As Janet Allured has pointed out, feminism was part of the "regional movement against social injustice that southerners initiated, mobilized, and energized, and that women native to other areas of the country took up and embraced as their own" in the 1960s (389). Allured adds that Louisiana feminists were active in campaigns "to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, to reform the community property system, to reform rape laws, and the anti-domestic violence movement" (389). The South saw much activism for social justice. A case filed in the South, and relevant to this article,

is *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which drew national attention. Mildred Loving, a Black woman, raised her voice against the state because the law would not recognize her marriage to a white man. The Loving couple demanded legitimacy for their relationship and their children, which led to the invalidation of every antimiscegenation law in the United States (US) (422). However, miscegenation remains a significant issue, and women characters in the works of all three authors are persecuted because of miscegenation.

Gerald Torres and Katie Pace question “whether patriarchy has a color,” which has been asked by feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Marylyn Frye, and in response, they say that “whiteness has a gender” (130). They point out that whiteness is considered superior in American racial thought, and whiteness is as gendered as it is racial (130). In other words, patriarchy is white, and whiteness is male. White men are superior and control the bodies as well as reproductive functions of white women. In “Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations,” Peggy Pascoe points out that “the very first prohibitions on interracial marriage” in the US were “passed in Maryland in 1664,” and it “was straightforwardly sex-specific: it prohibited marriages between ‘freeborn English women’ and ‘Negro slaves’” (7). The other states followed suit and defined the children of enslaved women as slaves. Miscegenation laws firmly controlled white women’s sexuality while giving white men sexual access to Black women (7). To monitor white women’s sexuality, the home became their confinement, and bearing and rearing their husband’s children became the norm. In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan exposes the dissatisfaction and confinement that women experienced as homemakers in the previous decade owing to forced gender roles that limited their freedom.

In 1976, Anne Rice’s first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*, was released, the same year Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* was published. However, Rice’s and Rich’s take on motherhood and women’s self-expression are opposite. Rich’s work became foundational in understanding motherhood by feminists. When Rich’s book was published, many feminists considered motherhood an obstacle to women’s liberation (“Rich, Adrienne” 1078). Rich challenged antimaternal sentiments and differentiated motherhood from mothering, defining motherhood as a repressive patriarchal institution constructed to serve male interest and mothering as women’s lived experiences as mothers (1078). According to Rich, motherhood as an institution is perpetuated by monotheistic religions, medical science, the mother-child relationship, and social responses to maternal violence (1078). Moreover, although the institution offers improved choices in gynecological and obstetric practices to upper-class white women, it is more restrictive towards mothers who are poor, lesbian, or racialized (1079).

The institution of motherhood is so powerful and oppressive that it creates

in women what poet Lynn Sukenick calls matrophobia, the fear of becoming one's mother (Rich 235). Rich explains: "Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (235). She further adds: "There may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely" (235). Women do not want to become their mothers, yet there is always a chance that they will, and they live in fear of that but also harbour a secret desire to emulate their mothers. Matrophobia, like any other fear, is repressed and can haunt someone, which makes it an element of the gothic. In a patriarchal system, no matter what mothers do for their children, Rich observes that "the small female who grew up in a male-controlled world, still feels, at moments, wildly unmothered" (225). Hence, under a patriarchal system, many women may feel unmothered and fear becoming oppressed like their mothers.

In her book *The Matrophobic Gothic and Its Legacy*, Deborah Rogers expands on this "fear of identification with and separation from the maternal body and the motherline"² and argues that matrophobia "is the central metaphor for women's relationships with each other within the context of ... male-dominated culture" (1). Rogers traces women's anxieties around motherhood from Romantic fiction to present-day television and includes the interpretation of women's anxieties around motherhood by both male and female authors and creators. According to Rogers, the defining characteristics of matrophobic gothic are inadequately mothered and deluded heroines who live in isolation in a gothic setting and are separated from their mothers but search for them (Rogers 38). Another characteristic is the presence of villains who may pose some danger; however, they turn out to be red herrings, whereas the real fear is that of the maternal (38). Matrophobic gothic may also have feminized heroes who fail to rescue their heroines and have a female sensibility that encourages passivity and depression (38). This sub-genre often includes an explanation of the supernatural to enlighten its heroine/s (38). In *Matrophobic gothic*, poetic landscapes also reflect the heroine's character (38). Rice, Brite, and Harris's gothic include some of these characteristics in their matrophobic gothic works.

Whereas matrophobia is the fear of turning into one's mother and losing one's freedom or suffering oppression, the matrophobic gothic of Rice, Brite, and Harris preaches the fear of freedom and self-expression, which bring fatal pregnancies and death to women in the novels. I first explore how Rice uses matrophobic gothic to caution against the establishment of patriarchy, the recognition of the matrilineal, and the mixing of races. The chief characters of

Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* are white males of European heritage living in the US. These characters are vampires who were mostly orphaned when they were born into vampire life. They search for their identity and origin, and their quests lead them to the six-thousand-year-old Akasha, an Egyptian queen of Mesopotamian heritage and the mother of all vampires. They also discover another equally old mother, Maharet, of Middle Eastern heritage, who traces her female line through all humanity. However, later in the series, these mixed-race lineages are whitewashed and overwritten through the reinvented character of a white patriarch, Amel.

In the next section, I discuss how Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* repeats the same pattern: The matriarch and the matrilineal are set aside for a patriarch and his legacy. Sookie, the protagonist of this series, is a mixed-race woman, metaphorically presented as a cross-species woman with rare abilities owing to her grandmother's, Adele's, reproductive choices. Adele's choices make Sookie unique and set her on an adventure with other species, metaphorically representing different racialized identities of the South. However, Harris sets Adele aside in the series and gives more importance to the patriarch, Niall, Sookie's great-grandfather, and his legacy. Sookie's sister-in-law, Crystal, a rebellious woman, tries and fails to exercise her freedom under the patriarchal control of her community and becomes a victim of a hate crime by racial purists of a superior species (race) in the series. Crystal also represents the poor women of the South who do not have security, economic independence, reproductive rights, and access to health and wellbeing.

In the final section, I turn to Crystal's predecessors, the teenagers Jessy and Ann, in Brite's *Lost Souls*. Like Crystal, these teenagers dare to exercise their sexual freedom. As a result, they are punished with rape, monstrous pregnancies, and botched abortions that lead to their untimely deaths. With their deaths, Jessy's and Ann's legacies are lost, as their children, like the vampire-human hybrid called Nothing, seek only the father. These works present strong-willed characters as poor examples of women under patriarchy and punish them for their self-expression and participation in miscegenation.

Despite the role and contribution of Southern women to social justice, as pointed out by Allured, these Southern gothic authors give precedence to white men in their novels. Perhaps that is also because some Southern states still lag in social reforms. According to the 2016 report on the status of women in the South, published by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, Louisiana is not the best place for women in the US. Compared to the other Southern states, Louisiana performed poorly in all the parameters used for evaluation, such as women's participation in politics, employment, and earnings, women's status in work and family, women's poverty and opportunities available to them, their reproductive rights, and their access to health and well-being (Institute for Women's Policy Research xxvi). Nonetheless, the

report also notes that the overall status of women in the Southern states is improving gradually in terms of earnings ratio and access to health and wellbeing.

It is worth noting that the condition of women in the South has been reflected upon in literature over the centuries. Pearl McHaney points out how Southern women were once stereotyped as “mammies, belles, ladies, and mulattos” (1). These stereotypes, McHaney adds, have been both perpetuated and disrupted in fiction. Over the ages, Southern women have also been called rebels, evidenced by their activism for social justice, as pointed out by Allured. From a survey of three centuries of American literature, McHaney concludes that in the twenty-first century, women in Southern literature “vigorously explore their sexualities, races, ethnicities, social and economic classes” and “successfully challenge the hegemony of white authors and white characters and the binary of black and white (1).” It is evident from studies like McHaney’s that women in Southern literature are no longer confined to racial and gender stereotypes. They now have a voice and agency within the Southern space. However, there are exceptions; Rice, Brite, and Harris give voice and agency to their women characters, only to take them away. They present strong women as harmful stereotypes. By doing so, they revert to an older South and its stereotypes that oppress women.

Erasure of the Matrilineal and the Matriarchs in Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*

The Vampire Chronicles (VC) are about white men. Of the thirteen *Chronicles*, only two are about women: *The Queen of the Damned* and *Merrick*. The main characters of the series are Lestat, Louis, Marius, and David, all white men of European heritage who have taken up residence in different parts of America over the centuries. Both Louis and Lestat exhibit symptoms of matrophobia. Initially, Rice identified with her vampire character, Louis (Riley 14). In *Interview*, Louis exhibits “female sensitivity that encourages passivity and depression” (qtd. in Riley 38), characteristics that Rogers identifies as symptomatic of matrophobia. Later, Lestat, who “was as always the voice of [Rice’s] soul in this novel” (*Called out of Darkness* 207), becomes the protagonist of the *VC*. Curious about his origins, Lestat embarks on a “quest for maternal figures/identity,” another symptom of matrophobia, according to Rogers (38). In *The Queen of the Damned*, Lestat’s quest leads him to two ancient mothers of Asian origin, Akasha and Maharet, whose children encompass all of humanity. They are not the ideal origin points for Lestat, and he disavows them. Although the mothers and the matrilineal are recognized, they are also reburied in the series, confirming matrophobia.

Akasha, a six-thousand-year-old Egyptian queen of Mesopotamian origin, is the first vampire and mother of the vampire kind. She was transformed into

an immortal being when a mischievous spirit named Amel, eager for a human host, infused himself with her spirit and blood as she lay dying. The infusion reanimated Akasha's body, giving her immortality. It also exaggerated the power-hungry nature of the queen by giving her an insatiable thirst for blood. Lestat's quest through white territories of Europe leads him to nonwhite origins—beyond Europe, Asia, and Africa and to mothers instead of fathers. Lestat also discovers that the Afro-Asian Akasha's blood runs through all vampires. Lestat is then introduced to Akasha's archenemy, Maharet, another six-thousand-year-old vampire who hails from the region of Mount Carmel, or present-day Israel. Whereas Akasha is the mother of all vampires, Maharet is the mother of all humanity. Maharet maintains a Great Family Tree, where she traces her lineage through her human daughter, Miriam, who was born to her before becoming a vampire. Maharet traces her line of descent through her female descendants, who have spread across the globe and intermarried with all communities through the millennia. Therefore, the tree includes all of humanity. Maharet's Great Family Tree attests to mixing races and debunks notions of racial purity. These matrilineal lineages are inclusive and encompass all communities. With these discoveries, matriarchal lineages and women's spaces become visible within dominant white male spaces occupied by the white male vampires, such as the New World colonies and older Europe.

With the discovery of Akasha and Maharet, Lestat also learns about their lives, actions, and the motherline. Although these women belonged to ancient societies, they were independent in their thoughts and actions. Akasha was a monarch. She is credited with bringing cultivation to her kingdom of Kemet and turning her people away from their traditional practices involving cannibalism. She is also credited for creating and disseminating the myth of Isis and Osiris to deify the royal couple, Akasha and Enkil. When Lestat finds her, Akasha has long been petrified or dormant yet still receptive to all humanity's voices and prayers. Maharet and her twin sister Mekare, in contrast, were called "witches" and were positively perceived as healers. They were also revered for their ability to communicate with spirits. As witches, they were not marginalized by their community but respected. As vampires, they witnessed history unfold, especially Maharet, who recorded the continuity and experiences of her female line over six thousand years. When Lestat looks at Maharet's Great Family Tree, its branches spread across all regions and communities. Although this history is fictional, it presents an alternative perspective from the female point of view about the role of strong and willful women in building civilizations. These women are not disenfranchised but are empowered leaders of their communities. Men do not control them. Enkil was a puppet king, and Maharet and Mekare were never married. These women were free.

Whereas Maharet is content with observing and nurturing humanity,

Akasha is not one to be satisfied with the narrow gender role; she dares to rule and control. Therefore, Akasha is presented as an Eastern despot in *The Queen of the Damned*, who has no respect or regard for other cultures. She looks down on older cultures that practice cannibalism and forces her people to change and follow her ways. She deifies herself and her husband and persecutes those who dare to differ. She puts her ideals before her people. Even after spending thousands of years in a catatonic state, when Akasha reawakens in the twentieth century, she prioritizes her vision over humanity. She is a telepath who hears all humanity's pain, suffering, and prayers. She concludes that men cause war and rape; therefore, 99 per cent of men should be killed to make a New Eden for women. Her maternal violence is for the protection of her children, especially women. She actively personifies the cruel, unsafe abode of Mother Nature, who demands sacrifices at her whim. Therefore, like nature, she, too, has to be controlled and reined in.

Through Akasha, Rice presents her interpretation of feminism. Rice lived in San Francisco in the 1960s and was not very comfortable with the version of feminism that she witnessed there (qtd. in Riley xv). She thought some feminists were very puritanical, tyrannical, and fascistic in their approach. According to Rice, "Feminism became a huge stick with which to beat people over the head. Women would attack other women in the most insensitive ways... [They] become truly enamoured of ideas ... believe they're absolutely right ... do the damnedest things ... get swept up in some pretty crazy cruelties" (qtd. in Riley 151). Akasha represents this negative interpretation. Therefore, Lestat and his acolytes choose to kill Akasha to prevent her from changing the world and to preserve the established order that subjugates women.

Akasha is also presented as a predatory woman of colour. She nurses Lestat with her powerful ancient blood and seduces him with her scheme of social engineering. She is an Africanist stereotype, a "nurse shark" in the novel. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison terms the portrayal of women of colour as "nurse sharks" in the works of many white novelists, including Ernest Hemingway (85). A "nurse shark" is a woman of colour who is described as predatory...[and] non-human" (84–85). They are "unnatural women who combine the signs of a nurse with those of the shark" (85), like Akasha. Morrison points out that in the works of white authors, white men describe women of colour in a way that is the farthest from humans or even mammals. They are depicted as "predatory, [with] devouring eroticism and signals the antithesis to femininity, to nurturing, to nursing, to replenishment" (85). Rice uses this stereotype for Akasha, who is monstrous and far from human. First, she nourishes her children with the immortal vampire blood but later becomes the antithesis of femininity when she decides to destroy men with violence.

After eliminating Akasha, a new order is established. Mekare becomes the

new mother by consuming Akasha's brain and the vampire essence, and Maharet acts as Mekare's guardian. However, the twins recede into the background, Lestat takes charge and becomes the prince and monarch of the vampires. From the matriarchal origin and order Akasha had espoused, the power is transferred to Lestat, the new white patriarch. Later, in *Prince Lestat*, Amel replaces Akasha as the father and progenitor of all vampires. Rice reinvents the backstory of Amel, in *Prince Lestat and the Realms of Atlantis*. Amel is described as a white man from the North with red hair and green eyes (*Atlantis* 347). Amel is credited with creating Atlantis to protect humanity from an interfering alien race of emotional vampires. Unlike Akasha, the dark predator, Amel is the white saviour. The positive qualities of the vampires are attributed to Amel, like the vampires' immortality, whiteness, and ability to control their thirst for blood with time. In contrast, the negativities, like bloodlust, are attributed to the power-hungry Akasha.

Although Amel loved Mekare when he was a spirit, he becomes agitated when he is transferred from Akasha's body to Mekare's. Akasha tortured and mutilated Mekare before turning her into a vampire; Mekare is not only mute but carries the trauma even after six thousand years. Amel hates the addled mind and the disabled female body hosting his spirit. Moreover, Amel is also upset because his essence is stretched across all vampires of all races and genders, which is torturous for Amel. Amel wants a white male body and convinces male vampires through telepathy to get rid of Mekare and Maharet. When Maharet is murdered, her Great Family Tree falls apart. Corporate lawyers in charge of her wealth distribute it among all her progeny, but no one remains to trace her female line any further or observe and preserve humanity. Mekare recognizes her inadequacy, willingly sacrifices herself, and transfers Amel to Lestat, a more desirable white male host (*Prince Lestat* 412). Finally, Amel's spirit is transferred into a synthetic biochemical body, prepared in a lab, and not born of a woman (*Atlantis*). Moreover, when his spirit is extracted from Lestat, Amel's connection is severed from all vampires, returning him to his old state of racial purity (*Atlantis*).

By the end of the series, spread over four decades, Asian mothers are replaced with white fathers. From including powerful women of Asian origin and their matriarchal orders and lineages at the outset, the story regresses to a white patriarchal order in the end. Akasha's blood, which united all vampires, and Maharet's Great Family Tree, which united all humanity, are forgotten with their deaths. The mixed-race heritage of vampires and humans discovered by Lestat is whitewashed by the precedence given to the older white Amel. The death of Maharet and the distribution of her wealth sever the matrilineal ties that united her family. The matrilineal lineage and the women's space that reemerge in *VC* collapse to restore the white supremacist patriarchal order. Akasha and Maharet remind everyone that racial purity is a myth. Whereas

Akasha is predatory, Maharet is a nurturing mother who silently observes humanity for millennia. However, like Akasha, Maharet also allows for the mixing of races. Therefore, they cannot be exemplary mothers. Their tales are cautionary and instill matrophobia through the cruel ends they are forced to meet.

There are other vampire women in Rice's series, like Gabrielle, Merrick, and Pandora, who seem equally empowered as the vampire men. However, these women also play second fiddle to Lestat and the other vampire men. Time and again, they are forced to perform as nurturers and called upon to sacrifice for the greater good. Merrick, who is of mixed heritage, is condemned by white male vampires in the series when she seduces Louis to become a vampire. Merrick manipulates Louis into turning her into a vampire; therefore, she is like Akasha, a power-hungry seductress. She redeems herself in *Blackwood Farm* by sacrificing herself for the good of all vampires and humanity. She becomes the mother to an evil spirit called Goblin, who thirsts for vampire blood. To prevent Goblin from becoming a more powerful entity from powers drawn from vampire blood, Merrick immolates herself while holding the infant Goblin's mortal remains in her arms as a surrogate mother (*Blackwood Farm* 766–67). From the “nurse shark,” Merrick transforms into the nurturing mother who serves the system. By doing so, she sets a good example, redeems herself in the eyes of the white vampire patriarchs Lestat and David Talbot, and receives forgiveness.

Miscegenation in Charlaine Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*

In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries (SVM)*, Harris's protagonist, Sookie, is a woman; nonetheless, when it comes to mothers and matriarchs, Harris's treatment is not different from that of Rice. Harris repeats the same pattern as Rice; she gives us a strong matriarch, kills her, and replaces her with patriarchs. Similarly, Harris also cautions against miscegenation, pointing out that when women's bodies and reproductive functions get out of control, they are put to death. Sookie's grandmother, Adele, and sister-in-law, Crystal, both engage in sex outside their marriages—more importantly, outside their races—and become targets of racial purists who brutally murder them.

In the *SVM*, supernatural creatures metaphorically represent people from different social and ethnic groups in the American South. The vampires are presented as a community with their own law and political order, which run parallel to and threaten American law and political order, instilling the fear of civil unrest and even a political takeover. The were-panthers stand for closed social groups and represent the poor white communities of the region. The shapeshifters and the werewolves are closer to a blend of Cajun and Native Americans, and the weretigers are perhaps more exotic migrants in the area.

These groups seem subhuman in their representation. Then there are the fea, comprising demonic and angelic beings with superhuman abilities. Except for vampires, who make pets of human beings or occasionally convert them, and the fairies who indulge in sexual acts with humans, most other groups prefer to stick to their packs or communities. The humans against the supernaturals, especially the vampires, are united under the church, the Fellowship of the Sun. They organize and execute many plots to exterminate vampires on several occasions. Each of these groups also follows gender hierarchy, and their women get into trouble when they become involved with men outside their communities.

Professor Raewyn Connell popularizes the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and dominant or emphasized femininity in her 1987 book *Gender and Power*. These act as tools of patriarchy that allow and promote practices to reinforce male dominance and female subordination in society. It is done by sanctioning a brand of aggressive masculinity accompanied by brute force in private and public spheres while looking down upon any form of weakness as a subordinated form of the same. Women falling in line with the submissive and accepted brand of femininity, which is desired by patriarchy, fall under emphasized femininity, and those who do not conform belong to the unacceptable subordinated version of it. The display of power by men is accepted, but a similar display by women, like in the case of Akasha, is rejected. Women are socialized and conditioned in such a way that they internalize emphasized femininity or at least try to; when they do not, the hegemonic masculinity compels them to do so. For example, women who act against the norms of their community and date or sleep with vampires, like Sookie and her coworkers, are targeted by the Cajun serial killer Rene Lenier. Rene is a human, and his hatred for vampires runs deep. His first victim is his sister, whom he murders and then rapes for dating a vampire. Rene seems unhinged in his hatred and desire to aggressively control the women of his community. He hides in plain sight, dates Sookie's colleague, Arlene, and works on the Road Crew with Sookie's brother Jason. Moreover, he pretends to be a good father to Arlene's children and a good friend to Sookie and Jason. However, when he fails to kill Sookie, he kills Adele. Although Rene is unaware of Adele's involvement with other species, he knows about her tolerance for vampires. Therefore, he does not hesitate to kill her in her kitchen. Rene's aggression towards human females involved with vampires cautions other human women to avoid such dalliances.

The deaths of her colleagues and her grandmother are warnings for Sookie. Before Rene's intervention, since she was little, Sookie felt safe around her grandmother and in her home. Rene takes that away from Sookie, throwing her into a state of unease in her home. However, she continues to live there and arms herself for protection. Rene disturbs the peace of Sookie's life and

home and takes away the matriarch who brought Sookie up. Sookie and her brother Jason were orphaned as children; Adele took them in and raised them. Through the thirteen novels in the series, Sookie repeatedly proves her mettle when faced with challenges, and she does so with all the human qualities and superhuman gifts she inherited from Adele. Sookie lives with her grandmother, loves and adores her, and never fears a future like hers until Rene enters the picture, kills Adele, and scares Sookie. However, when Rene finally attacks Sookie, she fights back and survives, bringing the killer to justice.

Sookie is an exception. She fights her battles and survives to tell the tale; she is Charlaine Harris's extended essay on the "final girl"³ trope. Although she embarks on her adventurous journey owing to her grandmother's legacy, she is robbed of the matriarch. However, she must survive by negotiating with patriarchs like vampires Bill and Eric, were-folk Alcede and Quinn, and fairy royalty like Niall and Breandan, who take over her life in *Bon Temps*. In *From Dead to Worse*, Sookie learns that due to Adele's husband, Mitchell Stackhouse's infertility, Adele's children were fathered by another man (61). Adele met the half-fairy Fintan Brigant in her garden, who fell in love with Adele. Adele chose to have an affair with Fintan only after he promised her the children she wanted (61). She wants to be a mother and makes it possible when her husband cannot help her. Adele is not passive but can make her own decisions. Fintan fathered Adele's children and left a gift for Adele, a magical object called a *cluviel dor*, which contains the power of fairy light magic. Sookie inherits this gift, and it helps save her life later in the series (*Dead Reckoning* 137). Adele also receives other gifts from the Fae folk. Fintan's friend, Mr. Cataliades, a demon, blesses Adele's progeny with telepathy. Not all of Adele's children or grandchildren inherit it, but Sookie does because she has Adele's essential spark (322). Though meant to be a gift, telepathy is a disability for Sookie, as it alienates her from the human population of the fictional small-town Bon Temps, Louisiana. Telepathy also attracts supernatural folk to her. They use Sookie's ability to their advantage, drawing Sookie into their feuds.

Besides the supernatural gifts that come to Sookie owing to Adele's relationship with the Fae folk and the strength of character that she inherits from Adele, Sookie is also surrounded and comforted by Adele's human memories and skills. Sookie continues to live in Adele's house, moves into Adele's room, and prepares Adele's recipes. However, part of Adele's human legacy is also taken away from her when another attempt on Sookie's life, an incident of arson, burns down Adele's kitchen (*Dead as a Doornail* 109, 119). Sookie is torn away from Adele's home, memories, and legacy and thrown into a quest to discover her royal fairy lineage through the rest of the series. Fintan Brigant, her grandfather, turns out to be a half-fairy prince and the son of the fairy king Niall (*From Dead to Worse*). The novels set the matriarch aside for the patriarch of a superior race. With her forefathers, Sookie also finds out

that her parents were killed because of their mixed fairy lineage by her great grandfather's archenemy and fairy purist, Breandan (*Dead and Gone* 134). Sookie is hunted by the same enemy until all portals connecting the worlds of humans and fairies are closed off in *Dead and Gone*. Adele's choice of sleeping outside her species and producing cross-species children endangers them. Although her parents die, Sookie survives despite her hybridity. When the fairies fail to erase all the fairy-human hybrids, they shut out the human world to prevent further traffic with humans.

However, Sookie's were-panther sister-in-law, Crystal, is not so lucky; she is brutally murdered for her promiscuity and her unborn hybrid child in *Dead and Gone*. In *Dead to the World*, we are introduced to Crystal from the isolated community of heavily inbred were-panthers in Hotshot, away from Bon Temps. Like other women of the clan, Crystal is also tasked with reproducing more offspring for the survival of her pack, even though, owing to generational inbreeding, Crystal constantly suffers miscarriages. The fact that inbreeding poses significant threats to the inbred child, as well as the mother carrying the child, is overlooked by the pack, or they may not care. The women in Crystal's community are confined by isolation, a trope of matrophobic gothic, and motherhood. They are restricted to their community's boundaries and left to suffer and die trying to produce children for their pack, as they are entirely cut off from Bon Temps society. They have their church and help one another within their community. They are beyond law and order as a Bon Temps sheriff goes missing and is presumed dead when he goes to investigate a were-panther rapist in Hotshot. It is evident that Hotshot society is controlled and managed by aggressive and territorial men, and the women of Hotshot, like Crystal, lack reproductive rights and access to health and wellbeing.

Crystal sees a way out of her dire situation in Jason. However, her jealous lover kidnaps Jason and turns him into a were-panther in hopes of deterring Crystal from leaving him. Moreover, Crystal's pack sees it as an opportunity to expand the pack with Jason's fresh blood, which means they do comprehend the risks of inbreeding; nonetheless, they practise it. Crystal's way out—her respite from the burden of motherhood, isolation, and suffering—is hijacked by her pack and deployed to serve the pack. Here, the men of the pack bend Jason's will by using force on him and infecting him with their venom. Despite knowing the risks of inbreeding, they convert Jason into a were-panther. Crystal looks elsewhere to escape her plight and cheats on Jason in *From Dead to Worse*. Her pack's patriarchal order does not allow her respite from her duties, and promiscuity does not help either. She is punished for cheating. However, when she is pregnant with Jason's child, who is a panther-fairy-human hybrid, fairy purist Breandan's goons, Lochlan and Neave, torture, crucify, and kill her.

Crystal stands for poor women who survive by allowing others, especially

men of their community, to use their bodies and die trying. Perhaps women of her community are socialized and conditioned in such a way that they have internalized emphasized femininity and motherhood as their destiny. When they do not, like Crystal, the hegemonic masculinity compels them to do so. Her desire to escape her fate of troubled motherhood and to express her sexuality for herself backfires when Jason is inducted into their pack. Finally, the fear of the abomination she threatens to give birth to gets her killed by racial purists.

Matrophobia is used to instill the fear of miscegenation and control the bodies of women and their impulse to break the rules through the treatment of Adele and Crystal by Harris. Rogers points out that in matrophobic gothic, often “arresting villains who, while they may pose some danger, are red herrings—the real fear is that of the maternal” (38). Therefore, the serial killer, Rene, who punishes women who dare to date outside their race, the werepanther men of the inbred pack at Hotshot who confine and subjugate their women with isolation and motherhood, and the racial purist fairies who mutilate and kill Crystal for carrying a hybrid child may come across as the villains in the series. However, these villains are just red herrings who are made insecure by their inability to control their women’s bodies and their wombs. Adele’s affinity towards the supernatural and superhuman or individuals from a different race inherited by Sookie and Adele’s and Crystal’s hybrid children pose a more significant threat to the men’s pure identities.

Death for Promiscuity and Unsafe Sex in Poppy Z. Brite’s *Lost Souls*

Like Crystal in Harris’s series, teenagers Jessie’s and Ann’s bodies are also used for procreation and cast aside after their purpose is served in Brite’s *Lost Souls*. Jessie and Ann are mothers to vampire-human hybrids and die in the process of childbirth or botched abortions. These white women are not presented as victims but as sexual predators. They are not submissive but challenge the men in their lives and set out to do as they please. Moreover, like Rice’s Akasha and Merrick, they crave power over men and aspire to become like them; hence, they are punished with unplanned pregnancies, death at childbirth, and forced abortions. Out of all the three authors, matrophobia is presented with the most gruesome and graphic details by Brite. Matrophobia in *Lost Souls* is directly about the fear of pregnancy and the ordeal of childbirth and abortion. The novel evokes matrophobia through what Erin Harrington has termed “gynaehorror,” horror that includes all aspects of female reproduction.⁴ Miscegenation is also part of it because Ann and Jessie conceive vampire babies that eat their way out of their mothers’ bodies. However, vampire babies affect their mothers’ bodies in the same way, whether they are impregnated by human or vampire males, as we see in the story of vampire Richelle narrated

by a suspicious magician, Arkady, in the novel.⁵ These fatal babies can also stand for sexually transmitted infections caused by unsafe sex with strangers. However, they may also cause fatality to their mothers owing to the lack of care, nutrition, and access to healthcare.

Brite's gothic horror works mainly focus on gay male characters and relationships. There are a few women of significance in them, and the few that are, regardless of their sexual orientations, become victims of patriarchal violence. In *Lost Souls*, the vampires are a separate race of beings who mate with human females to procreate vampire-human hybrids. The human females are either raped or seduced by the vampire patriarch Zillah. Pregnant women are murdered by their vampire progeny as the fledglings eat their way out of their human mothers' bodies. Not only does the mother die with the birth of the child, but there are also no memories of the mother for the child, who, like Jessy's son Nothing, the hybrid, looks only for his father. When Nothing finds his father, Zillah, and his companions Twig and Molochai—they immediately form homosexual and incestuous relationships. Zillah is unfaithful, territorial, and abusive. Above all, he serves as a figure for a lousy father and a paternity that must be left behind. However, Zillah's character is glamourized to the extent that Jessy and Ann easily fall prey to his charms. He is the apparent villain, the "red herring," but the real threat is the women's sexuality. In the novel, they express their sexuality, demand sex, and make themselves available to propagate the race of monstrous hybrids; they suffer for their desires and not for the fault of any man.

Jessy is a vampire wannabe and enthusiast who frequents a goth bar in New Orleans. Her sexuality is aberrant and predatory; she is on the hunt outside her home as well as the inside. She seduces her father, sleeps with him, and cuts him open to drink his blood (78–79). Jessy emulates vampires to become one. When Jessy first meets Christian, the only humane vampire in the novel, she smokes Marlborough Lite, and Christian remarks that only virgins smoke that brand (5). Rogers points out that "matrophobia may eroticize chastity as a source of female power" (75). Christian is impressed by Jessy's apparent innocence, and he eroticizes her feigned chastity. When she spies Christian engaged in the oral exchange of blood with the other vampires, Twig and Molochai, she violently interrupts them and goes after the vampire blood herself (8). She tries to steal the blood from vampires, like Rice's Merrick. Unfortunately, Brite's vampires are not made but born. Zillah feeds on Jessy and impregnates her with his vampire child. Not satiated by her sexual encounters, the pregnant Jessy moves in with Christian. Later, he gives in to the demands of a pregnant Jessy, has sex with her, and cares for her after Zillah abandons her. Jessy not only demands sex from Christian but also forces him to bite her and draw blood (9). Her bizarre sexual adventures come to an end when Nothing is born. He eats his way out of his mother's body,

killing Jessy in the process (9–10).

Rogers notes that pregnancy could cause a morbid preoccupation with the possibility of maternal mortality (75), and pregnancy can, therefore, function as a symbolic punishment for female sexuality, as in the cases of Jessy and later Ann. Matrophobia includes the fear of motherhood. Childbirth can often include complications, the horrors of which are inscribed on women's bodies. Rogers discusses these horrors, though in an eighteenth-century context when women gave birth at home under the supervision of midwives. Jessy, too, gives birth at home, but there are no experienced women or midwives to help her. There is only the vampire Christian, who sympathizes with her but is unable to help.

Jessy screamed until she could scream no more, and her eyes showed only the whites with their silvery rims, and great gouts of blood poured from her. When the baby slipped out of Jessy, its head turned and its eyes met Christian's: confused, intelligent, innocent. A shred of deep pink tissue was caught in the tiny mouth, softening between the working gums. Christian separated the baby from Jessy.... Then he knelt between Jessy's limp legs and looked at the poor torn passage that had given him so many nights of idle pleasure. Ruined now, bloody. So much blood to go to waste. (Brite 9–10)

Unlike Jessy, Ann is not a vampire enthusiast or wannabe, but she yearns for her abusive ex-boyfriend, Steve, even when she is in a healthier relationship (105–06). However, Steve blames Ann for his abusive behaviour towards her and admits that he used to rape Ann because he felt overpowered by Ann's sexuality (108). Later, to make Steve jealous, Ann sleeps with Zillah and his friends and becomes pregnant with a vampire child. Infuriated, Steve, with the help of his best friend Ghost and quack doctor Arcady, plans to abort Ann's baby. From his association with Richelle, Arkady knew the pregnancy needed to be aborted. Therefore, they poison Ann, and along with the baby, Ann bleeds to death. Even as she dies, Ann's sexuality scares Steve. "Between the milk-pale thighs" of Ann is her "treacherous cunt," and Steve "knew that if he looked at her too long, he would want her, even passed out. Yes, he could slip inside her so easily, it would be like coming home—but what if the thing in her womb reached a tiny hand down and grabbed him? What if it got ahold of him with its *teeth*? His hard-on was suddenly gone" (*Lost Souls* 311). By calling her vagina treacherous, he makes it sound like something that can be dangerous or trick him or others, like Zillah, to behave in a certain way, perhaps rape and abuse her. Ann lies helpless as Steve imagines the treachery of her body. Richelle, Jessy, and Ann do not receive the necessary care and support for their unplanned and complicated pregnancies. All they get are men who either welcome the birth and the preservation of their race, like

Zillah and Christian, or men who try to stop the birth, like Steve and Ghost. Although Steve and Ghost attempt to save Ann, they end up intervening and making decisions for the mother, causing more harm to her than help. Perhaps more knowledge would have helped, or would it? Rich observes that “the advent of the male midwife and obstetrician being one—passive suffering and the archetypal female experience of childbirth have been seen as identical. Passive suffering has thus been seen as a universal, ‘natural,’ female destiny” (129). Rogers agrees with Rich and adds, “Ironically, in the very act of giving birth, women were treated like helpless children, unable to make decisions” (82). The women who get pregnant in *Lost Souls* do not choose to, although they are careless and do not use protection. Jessy does not know she will die at childbirth, although Christian knows but does not help. Richelle knows she will die. However, she tries to abort her pregnancy, the only one deciding for herself. Ann, however, is rendered unconscious and force-fed the poison by Steve, Ghost, and Arkady. She does not decide to abort her child, nor does she approve of the use of poison (Brite 307–08). It may seem that the two-century-old vampire Richelle has more agency than human women, but none survive.

Just like Adele and Crystal, Jessy and Ann express their sexuality. They sleep with whom they desire. Moreover, they enjoy rape, incest, and abusive behaviours from their sexual partners. Their promiscuity comes to an end with a vampire child, much like the end of sexual freedom brought about AIDS in the 1980s, the decade preceding Brite’s novel. While New Orleans and the fictional Bon Temps in Louisiana serve as a playing field for the superhuman and human men in the novel, they also serve as a burial ground for the women. *Lost Souls* also includes elements of matrophobia. In *Lost Souls*, the deaths of teenagers Ann and Jessy not only highlight the fear of motherhood but also the fear of sexually transmitted infections, especially AIDS. Just like AIDS, the vampire hybrids take root in the bodies of these promiscuous women and eventually kill them.

Conclusion

Although late twentieth and early twenty-first century representations of Southern women may have become more inclusive of women with agency, racialized women, and women who express their sexuality, the representations could also take two steps back and depict such women as unacceptable. The report on the Status of Women in the South, mentioned in the introductory section, shows that women’s participation in politics is restricted in the South; their status is low in families, they suffer from poverty, and they also lack reproductive rights and access to health and wellbeing. The women in the works of Rice, Brite, and Harris are victims of these Southern issues. Moreover, a deep sense of matrophobia looms over these works. It is evident from the

above examples that the strong women characters found in these works do not inspire but are used to invoke fear of exercising freedom, expressing sexuality, and desiring power over self and sometimes even control over others. Most of all, they instill fear of miscegenation through the use of matrophobia.

Endnotes

1. Poppy Z. Brite is the pen name of author William Joseph/ Billy Martin, who uses it on his websites and in his horror fiction.
2. Naomi Ruth Lowinsky explains that the motherline is a name for the pattern in women's stories, "for the oneness of body and psyche, for the experience of continuity among women ... as a central organizing principle in the psyche of women, relating to us the ancient earth of female procreation" (134).
3. The girl or woman who faces the killer/s and survives to tell the tale in horror movies. Carol J. Clover coins the term in her article "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" (1987) and further explores it in *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992).
4. Gynaehorror is the "horror that deals with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex, through to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, and finally to menopause and post-menopause" (Harrington 3).
5. "Richelle was celibate. She had a terror of becoming pregnant. She insisted that no precautions were reliable enough. Should she conceive, she told me, it would mean the end of her" (Brite 272), and it did when she accidentally got pregnant.

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Mothering Performativity in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

In the novel The Joys of Motherhood, author Buchi Emecheta demonstrates how motherhood emerges from a patriarchal society characterized by a homogeneous system of oppression. Motherhood is closely intertwined with gender, where women's roles are often determined by traditional hierarchical norms. In Nigeria's Igbo culture, a woman is not only restricted to male dominance and domestic space but also to coercive mechanisms, such as polygamy, son preference, and widow inheritance. Although all are subjected to the same cultural and gendered background, the novel introduces the reader to Ona, Nnu Ego, and Adaku, women who develop their identities differently. Sometimes, these fictional characters follow the traditional Igbo views on womanhood, and other times, they subvert them by providing a new performative model. Applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to Nigeria's Igbo culture, this article argues that mothering performativity is a way of (de)constructing traditional Igbo views of womanhood. Using the method of a critical textual analysis of The Joys of Motherhood, I examine how the characters Nnu Ego, Ona, and Adaku internalize or subvert cultural tradition by liberating themselves from gender expectation. Butler's framework explains the possibilities of subversion and displacement within the dominant structure. Moreover, the power of performativity is articulated with the ideology of mothering in which mothers exercise agency by determining their routes through life. In contrast to the apolitical and oppressive institution of motherhood, mothering performativity transforms women's daily practices into a source of power.

Society attempts to define women by their power to give birth. Women internalize the role of family, marriage, and motherhood from early childhood. Motherhood is closely intertwined with the notion of gender, a tool for the construction of women's roles and the hierarchy between men and women. However, in the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, first published in 1979, Buchi

Emecheta subverts this paradigm by demonstrating how motherhood emerges from a patriarchal society characterized by a homogeneous system of oppression.

In Igbo society in Nigeria, for instance, a woman is subjected not only to male dominance and restricted to domestic spaces, but also to coercive mechanisms, such as “polygamy, son preference, and widow inheritance” (Ezeigbo 26). By drawing attention to this inegalitarian system, Emecheta’s novel critiques patriarchy by directly challenging the oppressive relationships that have limited the power and freedom of women and mothers.

Emecheta questions the societal stereotypes of womanhood. Struggling with the multiple identities of a so-called “woman”, “wife” and “mother”, Igbo women internalize the idea that without a child, they are failures, as when giving birth to children, they “ensure their people’s continuity” (Mbiti 144). The dominant discourse regulates and constrains women’s acts, gestures, and bodies. Nevertheless, womanhood cannot be defined by motherhood, as a woman may choose not to have children.

By incorporating Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, I argue that mothering performativity subverts traditional gender roles. *The Joys of Motherhood* introduces the reader to Ona, Nnu Ego, and Adaku, women characters who develop their women and mother identities differently and subversively. Although restricted to the same cultural and gendered background, Ona, Nnu Ego, and Adaku internalize but also rebel against gender norms, even subverting them by providing a new performative model.

In this article, I examine how the Igbo cultural traditions are internalized or questioned in Emecheta’s novel. The chosen critical framework can explain the possibilities of subversion and displacement within the dominant structure. Becoming a mother does not rely on a reified position of something static; rather, it is a constant negotiation process. The power of performativity is articulated with the ideology of mothering in which mothers exercise agency by determining their practices as subjects of their choices. Unlike the male-centered, apolitical, private, and oppressive institution of motherhood, the political setup of mothering focusses on women’s daily practices as a power source. For this reason, the interaction between mother and children must be considered from a relational and ever-changing perspective when examining the relationship between the chosen female characters and their children.

Ona’s Performative Model of Sex

Ona is a mistress of Nwokocha Agbadi, “a very wealthy local chief” and “a great wrestler” (Emecheta 9) who is married to many women but not to Ona. The relationship between this African couple disrupts the conventional patterns established for men and women in Igbo society. This “heartless

woman" (18) is "so stubborn" that "she refused to live with Agbadi" (11). The power, then, lies in the hands of this "beautiful young woman" (11) who refused "his wealth, his name or his handsomeness" (11). Ona makes a choice when not accepting Agbadi as her husband. Strong and independent, she deviates from tradition when refusing submission to marriage and motherhood. The character's words and actions contest the significance of womanhood in this traditional society. At first, her body is not reduced to an object of procreation.

In controlling her life, Ona has acquired individual autonomy in the face of male domination. Her father had promised that his daughter was "never going to stoop any man" and that "she was free to have men" (Emecheta 12). The "rude, egocentric woman" exercises power over her male partner Agbadi, who begs for her company by saying, "Come and stay with me.... Don't let us waste our lives longing for each other" (27). By bringing into the story the unconventional relationship between Ona and Agbadi, the writer paves a different way for women who give meaning to their sexual experiences. The couple's intimacy could have been omitted in this novel, however, the sexual act, which "woke the very dead" (22), is the joy of both characters, male and female, as pleasure is not only given to the male partner. Borrowing the words of the scholar Marie Umeh, the couple makes "one another sexually and emotionally happy" (192). This healthy, erotic relationship is maintained because of Ona's expression of sexual desire. Although respected as "the only woman who could make Agbadi really happy," "people did not much like her" (15). Ona's community disapproval is linked to her refusal to marry and to her sexual proclivities.

In the Igbo context, four codes govern female sexuality, as Umeh points out in "Procreation Not Recreation in Decoding Mama in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*." The first code says that "the glory of a woman is a man," and the second emphasizes the importance of a woman conceiving children, as "a woman without a son is a failure" (192). The third code is that "marriage is for the production of male heirs to continue the husband's lineage," and the fourth is that "a complete woman is a mother of healthy sons" (192). Listed in order of importance, these roles reduce women to good wives and mothers of sons. Nevertheless, what is performed differently is excluded from this patriarchal context. A transgressive female character like Ona resists her oppression and enjoys her fulfillment as a free woman. As her name represents in the Igbo society, she becomes a "priceless jewel."¹ Ona's gender performative model contradicts the social norms.

In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler argues that gender is "an act one does" (277). However, this act is not something "passively scripted on the body, and neither is determined by nature and language" (282). An act is "socially shared and

historically constituted” (281). Importantly, gender means the sedimented construction through specific corporeal acts. In other words, throughout these acts, the possibilities for cultural transformation of gender can be enhanced. Butler adds that “in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking” (271), the subversion of gender identity is constructed. Gender performativity does not mean a mechanical repetition of acts. These acts are not fixed or remain self-identical throughout time. In Butler’s argument, it is through the variation on the repetition of acts, behaviours, and the “reiterative and citational practice” (2) that a new approach to doing gender emerges. Ona’s denial of a crystallized discursive practice and the way her body responds to social norms enhance the fabrication of gender performativity—the subversive identity of a nonmother. Ona’s performative model of sexual liberation is opposed to the traditional social norm paradigm.

Ironically, when Ona gives birth to her daughter Nnu Ego, she dies. Becoming a mother was not something idealized by this character. Death is used by the writer to protest against the repetition of a fixed identity. Ona cannot cope with an oppressive system that reduces women to the mother identity and sees boys as more valuable. Thus, her death may be seen as her desire to live in another spiritual existence as she does not fit the conventional ways anymore. On her deathbed, Ona asks her beloved Agbadi to “allow” her daughter “to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman” (Emecheta 27). Ona’s words reinforce the power her daughter may have to make her decisions. Left motherless, Nnu Ego will not have a specific female pattern to connect. Ona’s experience with her mother has been neglected. Her father will be responsible for raising her. Will Nnu Ego be a powerful woman like her mother was? Will she follow and repeat the past or will she break with her community’s social conventions? As she receives no knowledge from her mother, Nnu Ego naturally accepts the traditional view of womanhood: “All I want to be [is] a woman and a mother” (53). In the context of this novel, Adrienne Rich’s words ring true: “A woman as a child bearer [is] the test of her womanhood . . . motherhood [is] the enforced identity for woman (26). Unlike her mother, Ona, who does not define her womanhood through motherhood, Nnu Ego wants a “child to cuddle and love” (34).

Nnu Ego’s Performative Model: Nonreproduction

Married to Amatokwu, a man chosen by her father in the rural community, Nnu Ego initially seems to have a happy life. She marries to have children so that “her old age would be happy” (Emecheta 54). Being a mother in this context guarantees immortality. The parents will be remembered by their descendants. This idea is spread throughout the narrative by proverbs, such as “When one grows old, one needs children to look after one. If you have no

children and parents have gone, who can you call your own?" (38). By introducing this proverb,² the writer shows how it shapes the characters' beliefs and thoughts. Reinforcing this viewpoint, African anthropologist John Mbiti adds, "Without descendants, an African spiritual existence is nullified" (33). Moreover, childbearing is a way of belonging to her local community.

Nnu Ego and Amatokwu have children. Nnu Ego's body responds to the cultural expectation of sexual reproduction. Motherhood reduces the female body object to the bodies of the children who need protection, care, and love. Suffering from not being able to conceive a child, Nnu Ego regards herself as a nonwoman. According to Mbiti, a barren woman is an "outcast" in her community (44). Such a social value structure, as Susan Arndt realizes, is hard on barren women because it denies them the right to be women. Childless women in her words "will never enjoy social acknowledgment" (39). Enza Gandolfo discusses the idea of a double lack, first as a woman and then as a nonmother. By not being able to have children, they are believed to be "damaged" and "abnormal," therefore constituting "the other of the other" (Gandolfo 113).

Tormented by the difficulty of conceiving a baby, Nnu Ego asks her chi,³ "O my chi, why do you have to bring me so low: Why I must be so punished: I am sorry for what my father did and I am sure he is sorry too" (Emecheta 32). In this prayer, Nnu Ego links her loss of fertility to a past event in which her father "pushed into the shallow grave" (23) a slave girl who was destined by tradition to be buried alive with his dead first wife. Struggling and fighting against this ritual, the slave girl dies, and a curse is assigned to Nnu Ego. To this extent, Nnu Ego's disgraceful life is justified by the girl's or the chi's premature death.

As a rotten piece of property, Nnu Ego is returned from her husband to her father who arranges a second marriage in Lagos, Nigeria. Her first husband cannot "waste [his] precious male seed on a woman who is infertile" (Emecheta 32). She is sent to a strange place to marry an unattractive man, Nnaife Owulum, whom she has never seen before. Living in between two places, the rural community and urban Lagos, Nnu Ego tries to negotiate the values of her new home. Women suffer from the "burden of double oppressive structures" (Ezeigbo 15) in the village as well as in the city. Whether a rural or an urban setting, women have a low status. Inhabiting the domestic space of a home, women do not "contribute" (Emecheta 81) as in their original home. Hence, the male figure is reduced to "a state of impotence and powerlessness by the colonial master" (Ezeigbo 15). Life in Lagos demands new social practices. Nnaife, for instance, works for a white master washing his family's clothes or the "white woman's smalls" (Emecheta 61), as his wife Nnu Ego says disappointedly. Nnaife does not exhibit the masculine energy or strength of the farmers and hunters of rural Ibuza. He does not "smell healthy" unlike

men in Ibuza who have the “healthy smell of burning wood and tobacco.” Instead, his body “smelt all soapy, as if he was overwashed” (44). He loses his dignity by living through the “shining white man’s money” (51) when providing for his family.

Although she does not approve of her husband, Nnu Ego accepts him. This is a strategy to accomplish the mother’s identity. She is obsessed with the motherhood ideal. Unlike Ona, Nnu Ego does not desire her male partner. Like a business transaction to procreate, Nnu Ego submits herself to a loveless, passionless relationship. The sexual encounter does not provide joy. She pretends she is there, letting “the hungry man” do his business, waiting for the fulfillment of his “insatiable appetite” (Emecheta 44). She conceives a baby boy, and her life becomes meaningful. Importantly, Nnu Ego engages with the mother identity by reproducing fixed cultural values. From now on, Nnu Ego is “going to start loving this man. He [Nnaife] has made me into a real woman” (53). Being a mother defines her, as she is grounded in an essentialized past. The way Nnu Ego does gender is “not an individual matter” in Butler’s sense as she follows “certain sanctions and proscriptions” (276). Gender performativity is reinforced by her body movements, gestures, and enactments restricted by this specific male-centered context. Nnu Ego reenacts and reexperiences a set of meanings already established for motherhood by dramatizing and reproducing a historical situation of the female body.

After a few weeks of happiness, her son dies. She cannot consider herself a real woman anymore. Her community realizes her failure, as the omniscient narrator questions, “Who was going to give her the energy to tell the world that she had once been a mother, but had failed? (Emecheta 71) The child has proved to the community that she is not a barren woman. Completely devastated, she starts running through the streets of Lagos in an attempt to commit an unsuccessful suicide. At the beginning of the novel, the reader, introduced to Nnu Ego in a distressed state with “unfocused and glazed” eyes “looking into vacancy” (7), does not understand why that woman chose her death. However, her story is gradually unveiled, and the reader becomes aware of Nnu Ego’s reason for considering her life meaningless.

Finally, Nnu Ego’s second marriage is “legalized” (50) by the gods when she gives birth to her second son, Oshia. “The greatest joy of my [her] life” (51) not only asserts womanhood but also reinforces something providential. However, Nnaife’s words, “Of course, I am happy to know that I am a man, yes that I can make a woman pregnant” (51) engenders the problematic invisibility of the female body. Motherhood, under the male authority, mainly asserts manhood.

Facing poverty when her husband, Nnaife, loses his job, Nnu Ego must reconcile the old and new systems. Having neither money nor family resources, she faces this chaotic scenario by disrupting the conventional pattern of

motherhood. Her engagement for the survival of her two sons, Oshia and the baby boy, Adim, can be assigned to the ideology of mothering according to Rich or intensive mothering (O'Reilly). Several characteristics define intensive mothering: children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother; mothering must be provided twenty-four hours a day; mothers must always put children's needs before their own; mothers must turn to experts for instructions; mothers feel fully satisfied, fulfilled, and completed in motherhood; and mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children (O'Reilly 11). Although Nnu Ego does not rely on the instruction of experts, her mothering performativity falls under intensive mothering. The woman character is the one who defines the daycare of her children by exercising power over the traditional ways and making a different choice. She resituates herself by articulating a new mother-identity dimension and a working woman. Her act of subversion in this cultural scenario is expressed by her words when she says: "I can use part of the money we have left to buy some stocks of cigarettes and matches and start my little business again? ... We can't lose, and it will give me something to do" (Emecheta 86). Nnu Ego's body represents the material ground of received meanings; sometimes, her body dares to innovate a new meaning to ensure her children's survival. Some acts may deviate from the norm, but most will reiterate the old and well-known structure.

Although Igbo women may face constraints, "they are still able to challenge social prejudices" (Ezeigbo 2) through such activities as trading, teaching, nursing, or acting as spiritual advisors. Nnu Ego learns how to trade and makes a "display outside the house, with cans of cigarettes, boxes of matches, and bottles of kerosene" (Emecheta 103). The protagonist explores an option that can liberate herself from the "oppressive set-up" (Ezeigbo 2). She deconstructs the gendered dichotomy of public and private spheres by showing that work and family cannot be seen in isolation as separate institutions. When examining racial and ethnic women's experiences in the United States, Patricia Hill Collins remembers that these two spheres are interwoven, and the experiences of mothering are linked to social concerns (47). As Collins explains, "Black women, through motherhood, can express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing themselves" (118). This notion is also found in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in which the mother's experience cannot be separated from the historical and cultural context.

In Nnu Ego's culture, she is expected to devote herself exclusively to her children as she remains primarily responsible for them. According to her husband, she has "to look after your child. That at least is a woman's job.... Who is going to take care of him when you go out to sell your stuff" (Emecheta 86). In defiance of this oppressive culture, Nnu Ego tries to create the best conditions for herself and her family; her choice defines her maternal power.

She relies on her strength to face the difficulties of providing for her children's housing, food, clothes, and education. Intensive mothering comes from the double responsibility for herself and the other as she believes that "everything would be just fine when the children grew up" (162). The established symbiotic relationship between mother and children benefits both parties involved, not only in the present but also in the afterlife scenario.

The important responsibility of the children's development relies on the female hands who keep alive the cultural significance. For O'Reilly, the daily struggle is "an act of resistance; essential and integral to the black people" (125). Children are empowered by living in a space nurtured by love and care. When Nnaife fights in World War Two, Nnu Ego becomes the main financial provider for years and fights "the war with her children" (Emecheta 183). From this perspective, Nnu Ego's power is exercised over her children throughout the daily act of mothering. However, the reader may question the protagonist's power of subverting when looking carefully at the way she raises her children. Motherhood is a site of power, but in this male context, it can be a site of oppression.

Before Nnaife's departure to fight the Germans, he inherits his second wife from his dead brother. The arrival of Adaku makes room for the discussion of Nnu Ego's identities as a mother and a woman when facing the tradition of polygamy. Although bothered by this situation, Nnu Ego accepts her new position as the mature senior wife and follows the convention. Not surprisingly, this new situation provokes tension between the two characters, who need to learn to share the physical space of the only tiny room and the attention of the male figure. Shaped by the same common values, the performative processes developed by Nnu Ego and Adaku disrupt the "coherence and unity of the category of women" so well criticized by Butler (14), who argues for the examination of the myriad ways "woman" is constructed. From the novel's beginning, Nnu Ego's portrayal has focussed on her obedience and patience. Adaku, in contrast, represents the threat and menace of the "shameless modern woman" (Emecheta 118) to traditional ways. She rebels against the pattern of the ideal woman by exhibiting her joy for sex and material things yet is attracted to the Igbo centre of power, as she tries to become a mother of boys. The rivalry among the cowives and the social pressure they feel to achieve status and social dignity permeate the private home space. Nevertheless, the point here is Adaku's jealousy of Nnu Ego being a mother of boys.

As a mother of two daughters, Adaku faces prejudice from her local community for not having a baby boy. Relegated to the margins, she is not respected as a woman who could help her husband preserve his legacy. Her daughters "will marry and go" (Emecheta 119). The cultural conventions impose on mothers a strict role. Nnu Ego perpetuates this cultural norm by prioritizing the education of her male sons, as she believes in the importance

of putting them in “a good position in life” (176). The boys “were encouraged to put more time into their school work” (180). The girls, however, were often bound to household tasks and rarely enrolled in school. Nnu Ego, the good mother, has dedicated her entire life on behalf of her children. She does not find a purpose outside her relationship with her children and husband. Her performative acts are tied to the children’s upbringing and family. In contrast to Nnu Ego’s performative process, Adaku does not succumb to the harsh social pressures placed upon her:

I see that you’re laughing at me. Yes, Adaku, you can afford to make fun of me. You may think you’re right, but I’m telling you that you are wrong, whereas you chose money and nice clothes, I have chosen my children but you must remember that wealth has always been in my family. I am only poor in Lagos. Go to Ibuza and see how rich I am in people- friends, relatives, in-laws. (Emecheta 160)

Performing Authority: Adaku

The women’s lifestyles differ from each other. Nnu Ego does not leave the past behind. The cultural and gendered context she was born into is not something easily erased. For Nnu Ego, Adaku is not a good mother. She has made the wrong choice by giving too much value to material things and appearances. The problem here concerns not choosing children as the only goal or joy in life.

The importance of a mother meeting her needs is crucial to the potential mother-child relationship. Adaku’s joy is not only fulfilled by interacting with her daughters. By implication, Adaku’s performative model relies on exercising mothering from a position of authority. According to O’Reilly, “Empowered mothers do not always put their children’s needs before their own nor do they look to motherhood to define and realize their identity” (14). Being able to live her life, Adaku becomes aware of what keeps her a prisoner of the oppressive system by exhibiting a multiplicity of identities through various relationships and activities: “Everybody accuses me of making money all the time. What else is there for me to do: I will spend the money I have on giving my girls a good start in life. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future.... I’m leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife” (Emecheta 168).

Adaku gives up the highly regarded institution of marriage. Her words demonstrate her authority in making choices for herself and her daughters. If motherhood within a patriarchal framework restricts and limits her approach to gender roles, she will adopt a mothering practice that actively resists and refuses male dominance. Nevertheless, she realizes the importance of sending her daughters to school to support their development and growth as critical

children. Through education, her girls will be empowered and may have the chance to change the oppressive system. By leaving Nnaife's home, Adaku asserts her independence and writes a new narrative for herself and her daughters as she chooses to break away from the standards set by the senior wife. In charge of her life and body, she refuses to be regulated by societal institutions. Through her specific bodily actions, Adaku challenges the limited perceptions imposed on her body by enacting a new gender identity. This "performative accomplishment" (Butler 271) is constituted in time, and the woman character is part of this ongoing construction process. Despite the impact of social norms on her body, Adaku can redefine its meaning. The body here is no longer "a kind of slate or surface on which cultural meanings are imposed" (Butler 271). Performativity, here, through bodily reenactment, makes room for individual subversion. In an interview with Vasu Reddy, Butler asserts the following: "Norms cannot be embodied without an action of a specific kind, and they cannot continue to enforce themselves without continual action. It is in the thinking through of this action that change can happen, since we are acting all the time in the ways that we enact, repeat, appropriate, and refuse the norms that decide our social ontology" (Butler and Reddy 118).

The transformation of gender inequality starts with women's commitment to challenging male dominance. In Emecheta's novel, a woman has to be "courageous, independent, self-determined, ambitious and assertive" (Ezeigbo 22) to survive this oppressive environment. Adaku will be responsible for her own life. The reenactment of the mother's experience means she voiced protest against the patriarchal society. The performative accomplishment was achieved through questioning the reified identities of women and mothers. By implication, Butler remembers that there are "strict punishments for contesting the script" (Butler 282). "The unwarranted improvisations" (Butler 282) of both bodies found no place in the fictional scenario. Ona dies, and Adaku is marginalized by her community when trying to chart a new path.

Conclusion

In this novel, Emecheta has problematized the rigidity of cultural norms by exploring gender performativity through the lenses of Ona, Nnu Ego, and Adaku. If gender is performative and if these women do gender differently, their experiences, voices, and emotions towards the act of mothering will not follow the same pattern. The performativity framework has invoked a constant resignification of gender, destabilizing gender expectations. In Butler's words, "What is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (271). Women's bodies are sources of received and

innovated meanings. In this sense, the possibility of transformation is awakened by the instabilities that question the hegemonic forces of regulatory laws.

At the beginning of the novel, Nnu Ego's practices are potentially determined by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Her performative model consists of a repetitive core of values and tradition without critical thinking. However, this experience is not only limited to the domestic sphere. The difficulties for survival in a male-centered community have opened an avenue for mothering performativity. Transformation is enhanced through Nnu Ego's subversive act of becoming the financial provider of her family while facing poverty. Although responsible for her experience of mothering, in the end, she realizes the impossibility of creating a life outside and beyond it. Before her premature death at the age of forty-five, she becomes aware of the conditions of women's imprisonment and how she has contributed to it by saying:

God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? ... What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them, I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give up my soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them.... Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my flesh and blood. (Emecheta 187).

This liberating speech brings into question the responsibility of women to make the transformation possible. She realizes that the ironic joy of being a mother is not enough to promote happiness. The deconstruction of the inherited identities depends on women's first move when they start speaking for themselves rather than being silenced as human beings.

The performative model of mothering applied to Nnu Ego differs from Ona and Adaku. Ona and Adaku renew their body act unconventionally. They have denaturalized what has been naturalized by the norms of their society. Importantly, the centrality of these characters demonstrates their subversive power. A woman may have authority by making her own social and sexual choices. A woman may also choose not to have children. Womanhood through motherhood cannot function as a regulatory norm. Women's liberation demands the right to bodily autonomy and self-determination.

Endnotes

1. Arndt states that the figures in Emecheta's novel carry figurative Igbo names. Ona means "priceless jewela", Nnu Ego, "twenty bags of cowries," and Oshiaju, "the bush that just refused" (51). Moreover, according to Emecheta, the names of her characters are always carefully chosen. The

- names have to identify with something. When a child is beautiful, we say “Nnu Ego.” Adaku, for instance, means “the child of wealth” (qtd. In Ogundele 449).
2. Sayings, folktales, and proverbs pave the way for teaching moral lessons. Another example of male domination is thus shown in the novel: “When the children were good, they belonged to the father; when they were bad, they belonged to the mother” (Emecheta 206). Despite all the efforts women make to nourish children, they are always pushed into the background. Her visibility is only noticed when things go wrong. Gender’s structure frames motherhood.
 3. In the book *The Supreme God as a Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*, Donatus Ibe Nwoga states that the “chi concept is central to Igbo religious thought” (Nwoga 64–65). According to the African professor, “The individual depends on his *chi*. He prays for his *chi* for his achievements and successes” (Nwoga 65). Donatus remembers that the chi concept as “the person who has reincarnated in the individual” (Nwoga 65) is still prevalent among West Niger. A man’s chi is “the alter ego of the person concerned, whose present life must be supervised, ruled and guided by the circumstances of the age’s or *chi*’s life in her previous world existence” (Nwoga 65). In the novel, Nnu Ego is born with a “painful lump on her head” (Emecheta 27). This physical sign can be linked to the way the slave girl was beaten on the head to keep her in the grave.

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Maternal Legacies: Reflections on the Life and Work of Dr. Marie Porter, AM

This article honours the life and scholarly contributions of Dr. Marie Porter AM (1938–2023), a transformative figure in motherhood studies whose work bridged lived maternal experience and academic theory. Drawing on her journey of mothering three sons, including one with severe physical disabilities, Marie developed the concept of “transformative power in motherwork,” which theorizes how mothers develop agency and adaptability through their maternal practice. Through analysis of Marie’s published works, particularly her groundbreaking text Transformative Power in Motherwork (2008), and unpublished manuscripts and speeches, we explore how her scholarship emerged from and was deeply informed by her mothering lived experiences. The article examines Marie’s key theoretical contributions, including her development of concepts like “incipient agency,” and her analysis of how mothers resist dominant master narratives of motherhood. As a mother and scholar who helped establish motherhood studies in Australia, Marie’s work demonstrates how mothers develop diverse agentic skills even within constraining institutional contexts. We argue that Marie’s scholarly legacy offers vital insights for contemporary maternal scholarship by emphasizing mothers’ capacity for resistance and transformation. Written by three scholars who worked closely with Marie, this article weaves together academic analysis with personal reflections to capture the enduring impact of her work on motherhood studies and the lives of those she mentored.

Introduction

In this article, we seek to honour the life and work of Dr. Marie Porter AM (1938–2023). A scholarly colleague and mentor for each of the authors, this inspirational woman was also a very dear friend; therefore, throughout this article, we refer to Marie using her first name. Marie’s death has left an

enormous hole in our lives and the lives of many other scholars and nonscholars because she unstintingly shared her hard-earned experiences and wisdom with all who came within her orbit. As the title suggests, this article highlights the rich legacies that Marie's mothering, mentorship, advocacy, writing, and presence have left through her life, family, and friendships. Our reflections seek to pull together key threads from Marie's work within motherhood studies and the interconnections between her lived experiences as a mother and her contributions as a maternal scholar and advocate. Where possible, we have used Marie's words to share pieces of her story and explain elements of her thinking.

Sophie has written this article with some input from Jenny and Lisa as our collective relationships with Marie have guided this investment in and capturing of Marie's work and legacies. For context, Sophie met Marie at the Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (AMIRCI) conference in 2014 in Melbourne, Australia, connecting through their shared research area of interest: mothers of children with disabilities. Marie encouraged Sophie to become involved in the AMIRCI committee, where Sophie eventually held the position of president for five years. Marie supported Sophie through mentorship, personally and professionally, as she completed her doctorate in sociology specializing in motherhood studies, focussing on exploring the experiences of mothers of children with disabilities.

Jenny met Marie after a travel agent connected them. They both booked to travel to Toronto, Canada, for the 2004 Motherhood Studies Conference. As they were both based in Brisbane, Australia, a connection was immediately established, which quickly turned into Marie mentoring Jenny through her doctoral studies, which focussed on the living realities of mothers with young adult children in twenty-first-century Australia. This mentoring relationship quickly morphed into a deep and caring friendship until Marie died, with Jenny's love and respect for Marie living on through her memories.

Lisa met Marie and Jenny at the same 2004 conference. Her and Marie's relationship grew during the planning and running of the 2005 Australian-based conference. Despite a twenty-seven-year age difference, they bonded through many shared values and traits, including wicked senses of humour and red hair, and their connection grew from Marie's mentorship during Lisa's doctoral studies to a wise woman and confidante. Sharing triumphs and challenges over eighteen years transformed their relationship into that of marvellous friendship, and despite a physical absence, Marie continues to be present in Lisa's life.

Birth and Growing a Motherhood Career

Marie's career was birthed through her role as a mother and, as she would describe it drawing on Patricia Hill Collins, her motherwork with her three sons. In Marie's words:

I am the mother of three sons. Simple statement, but behind this simple statement is the story of half my life. It is a long and involved tale of a life lived on the edge of unknowing. It too frequently descends into the darkness that exists where life meets death, where we stand waiting to meet the victor of these basic forces. Sounds a dramatic outcome from deciding to become a mother? I assure you it is not as dramatic as the reality. (Porter, "A Mother" 114)

From early childhood, Marie dreamed of being a teacher, which became a reality after completing teacher training. However, after working as a primary school teacher for only a few years, Marie married her beloved Alan but was forced to comply with government regulations prohibiting married women from being in paid employment. Marie gave birth to her first son in 1963, and many years later reflected: "It was he who gave me my mother identity, who caused the most extreme of feelings to wash over me, who had to cope while I learnt to mother" (Porter, "A Mother" 114).

She described her feelings of intense love, alongside anxiety, as she learned to mother, feeling the contrast between her routinized and organized days as a teacher and the unpredictability of mothering a baby: "The mother road, full of twists and bumps was both unfamiliar to me and being covered at breakneck speed with my baby son in the driver's seat" (Porter, "A Mother" 114). Three-and-a-half years later, the birth of her second son left Marie believing she had discarded her "training wheels" (Porter, "A Mother" 114–15) in learning how to mother, but she also noticed the adaptation and new learning she experienced in adjusting to the different needs of her two sons. When these sons were six and two and a half, Marie and Alan decided to have a third child:

By now, I suppose if someone had asked me, I would have said I was an experienced mother. No doubt that was true. Sara Ruddick (1989) argues that maternal work consists of preserving, growing, and training the young in social responsibility. My two sons were well on this road. Six weeks before my third baby was due, I wrote to my close friend telling her of my fears for my baby. This feeling was new to me. Such fears had never entered my head during my other pregnancies. (Porter, "A Mother" 115–16)

Marie's third son, Anthony, was born after what she described as a short and easy labour but recalled: "It puzzled me at the time, and still puzzles me, why,

with this easy birth, I spent the next twenty-four hours crying. I had not descended into sadness after the others were born. Do we sometimes ‘know’ the future on some inexplicable level? At this stage, there was no inkling of the problems ahead” (Porter, “A Mother” 116).

When Anthony was six weeks old and in hospital with the first of many chest infections and challenges, Marie further recalled, “I needed all my professional and organizational skills and every bit of experience I had gained in my mothering of my other sons just to get through a day” (Porter, “A Mother” 116). When Anthony was four months old, Marie sensed he was experiencing challenges her older boys had not. After much testing and investigation, nothing wrong could be found but then: “Four months later, when he still hadn’t improved physically, we were told he would not survive until his first birthday. He didn’t have enough muscle tone to support life and would either choke or die of pneumonia.” (Porter, “A Mother” 118). Along with the heartache such news brought, Marie described it as validation of the worries and concerns she had held: “My main concern apart from keeping Anthony alive, was how to prepare my two older sons” (Porter, “A Mother” 118).

Over time, Marie had to learn how to cope with and support Anthony’s challenges of heart failure, choking, and massive spasm attacks that could prove fatal if they were not responded to quickly and properly while also meeting the “demands of mothering” (Ruddick) her older sons: “We all learned to rejoice in the many small victories and recover from the many crises quickly. Anthony was a great help as his wonderful optimistic nature and his determination to live was always there for us to draw on” (Porter, “A Mother” 119). Anthony’s needs increased as he got older, and at the time of Marie’s writing in 2000:

Anthony is 30. He has been near death countless times. His disabilities became worse as he got older. He lost his ability to swallow, to make sound, the very limited function he had in his right index finger. He can no longer say or do anything, but he can communicate well with his vital brown eyes and also with his yes/no. He is fed through a tube. He was told a year ago that his lungs would be lucky to support life for another six months, but my smiling, determined son is still with us, enjoying his circumscribed life. He listens patiently to, and sympathizes with, other people’s problems despite the vastness of his own. He is the only person I know who can throw a party with five days notice and have 85 people come. (Porter, “A Mother” 119)

After a full and loved life, Anthony died on December 5, 2000. Marie forever stayed a mother of three sons, with her love and commitment to each of them shining through all her conversations.

Marie as a Scholar

Marie's life and work were transformed through her motherwork and relationships, and the cornerstone of her research and theoretical findings from her dissertation reflected this. With her commitment to the demands of mothering three sons and the emotional and physical labour involved in caring for Anthony overriding any possibility of a return to her previous professional life, Marie returned to her first love, research, learning and teaching: "While all my friends returned to their profession eventually, my commitment to my disabled son resulted in this possibility being discounted. By 1981, exhausted from motherwork, I sought a challenge away from it, and returned to my old love of study. I have been involved in academic work ever since" (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 4). Concerning her doctoral studies, Marie notes: "The choice of a topic for my doctoral studies was influenced by my past and my circumstances at the time I undertook the research. My adult life had been dominated by two working situations—teaching and mothering. The desire to teach was my first love. I regretted the loss of my profession when I had to resign on marriage... I missed my work" (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 4).

During her doctoral studies, Marie attended her first motherhood scholarship conference in Canada in the late 1990s, which spurred her to bring motherhood studies to Australia. The first Australian feminist motherhood conference, organized single-handedly by Marie, was held in 2001, followed by another in 2005. Marie then quickly set about formally establishing the first, and so far, only, organization for maternal scholarship in Australia. Originally called the Association for Research on Motherhood, Australia (ARMA), after the Association for Research on Motherhood (ARM), the group changed its name to the Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (AMIRCI) after ARM changed its name to the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI). Marie steered the organization through all these changes. In 2019, with Marie having handed over the leadership to others, AMIRCI changed its name to Maternal Scholars Australia (MSA), and it continues to support and promote feminist motherhood scholarship and scholars.

After being awarded her PhD in 2006 from the University of Queensland and receiving the dean's commendation, Marie set about establishing a teaching course at the University of Queensland with the support and guidance of her mentor and dear friend, Dr. Andrea O'Reilly, the founder of feminist motherhood studies as an internationally recognized field of scholarship. Despite its success, the course, *The Mother: Images, Issues and Practices*, was cancelled by the university due to timetabling issues.

Marie's Works, Publications, and Awards

In 2008, Marie published *Transformative Power in Motherwork*, based on her 2006 thesis exploring the experiences of a group of Australian women who first became mothers in the 1950s and 1960s. Over the years Marie has co-edited and published several texts on motherhood and lectured and presented internationally.

Marie was made a Member of the Order of Australia AM¹ in the 2018 Queen's Birthday Honours and advocated for mothers and maternal scholarship throughout the rest of her career and life. She shares in her *Reflections on the Continuing Need for Maternal Scholarship* after being awarded the AM:

I am an ex-schoolteacher, a lover of education and learning, an academic, and, most importantly, a mother and a grandmother.... My aim has always been to create in our society a recognition of the importance of mothers and the work they do caring for, rearing, and training their children to fit into the society in which they live.

This aim grew out of my experience of the contrast between the respect I received as a teacher when compared with the incredible absence of legitimization of my work as a mother. I was "just a mother," although as a mother of three small sons, one of whom was severely physically disabled and frequently had life-threatening episodes of illness, I had no time off, no holidays and no weekends. I worked far more hours and the work was physically onerous, emotionally and mentally draining.

I became aware of the many mothers in a similar situation, most of whom did not have the advantages that I had. When I researched the experiences of a group of Australian mothers for my PhD, a common factor was that none of these women thought their mothering was valued by society although every one of them highly valued the work they had done mothering their children. (Porter, *Reflections*)

Reflecting on her 2016 *AMIRCI President's Report*, Marie states, "I consider maternal research and study as the most neglected, but most important area of study." Based on her extensive experience in the area of disability care, she further contends: "That no matter how busy you are, if you want a need fulfilled, the only people who will drive it are the people who have the problem" (Porter, *AMIRCI President's Report*). This reflection is emblematic of the tenacity, resilience, and drive that Marie developed throughout her life and in her mothering. It also reflects her calling to encourage the rising and power-claiming of mothers and maternal scholars.

Situating Marie's Scholarship within Motherhood Studies

As has been the case for so many of us whose careers are within motherhood studies, Marie's key influences were foundational maternal scholars, such as Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, and Patricia Hill Collins. In the opening of *Transformative Power in Motherwork*, Marie cites Rich: "I told myself I wanted to write a book on motherhood because it was a crucial, still relatively unexplored area of feminist theory. But I did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen me" (Rich qtd. in Porter 15). Marie draws parallels between Rich's blending and amalgamation of multiple subject positions as a mother and scholar with her own experience: "The book that she [Rich] wrote could not have been written by any other person, nor written if Rich had not been a mother. This book has a similar history. My experiences in mothering have developed my personality, my intellect, my awareness, my emotional life, my understanding and empathy, my ideas and my ethics" (Porter, *Transformative* 1).

Although Marie uses Rich's foundational distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as an experience, it was Ruddick's work that had the most profound influence on her and the development of her scholarship:

She [Ruddick] argues that mothering has three aims: to preserve, grow and train up the young to be independent and socially adept members of the society in which they live (1989). She further argues these maternal practices of preserving, growing and transforming life lead to a particular way of thinking that she refers to as maternal thinking... Her ideas on what mothers do and how their actions lead to a particular way of thinking resonated with my own ideas and practices. I had a clear understanding of this process because Anthony, my youngest son, was a challenging child to mother. Ruddick's work, like Oakley's, had the authority of authenticity. (Porter, *Transformative* 10)

Marie's life and scholarship both centred on the act and practice of mothering in the context of the relationship between the mother and her individual children. She references Martha McMahan's argument that while "mothers produce children, children produce mothers" (3) and takes McMahan's work further: "The transformative relationship is one of power which transforms both the child into an adult and the mother into a multi-skilled, capable woman in many essential areas of life" (Porter, *Transformative* 2).

This focus on the act and practice of mothering and the relationship with the individual children is also placed within a wider social and cultural context that shapes both mothers' and children's experiences. Marie also draws on African American theorizing on mothering in both fiction and academic work: "Afro-American and Native American maternal scholars, in particular

Collins, became my fourth mentor/s... These scholars argue that mothering is a relationship of power wherein the mothers are agents who prepare the next generation to understand their culture and to be proud of who they are” (Porter, *Transformative* 11).

It was Marie’s own experience of mothering Anthony within an ableist society that shaped her mothering values and necessitated honing specific mothering skills:

My self approach was that I decided that when Anthony died it would not be because I was incompetent. I would preserve, grow and train this child as I did my older two. I’d just have to learn more, be more efficient, and I must create a pattern to do this because the patterns of life on offer for disabled people that I saw in Australia in the 1970s were not good enough for my darling son with his many gifts. (Porter, “A Mother,” 118)

Through adapting and responding to the unique needs of each of her children and doing so within a social structure and system of patriarchal motherhood, Marie developed specific skills and perspectives that were integrated into, and which fuelled, her academic drive.

Key Research Findings that Led to Conceptual Development

Marie’s doctoral thesis explores the experiences of twenty-four Australian women who first became mothers between 1950 and 1965. She says of her research:

I present a grounded theory of transformative power in motherwork that has emerged from the analysis of interviews. The mothers talked about what they did in their active mothering years.

I argue that despite being constrained by the gender bias in the patriarchal context, these mothers were agents who developed skills that enabled them to resist or creatively deal with the constraints they faced. Their emphasis was on their agency and the power to nurture their children into reasonable adults. Their awareness of the importance of their motherwork acted as a motivator in this development.

I argue that the relationship between each mother and each of her children is a transformative power relationship in which both mother and child are transformed—the child into an independent adult and the mother into a skilled self-motivated agent through her motherwork....

Transformative power expressed in motherwork can be recognised analytically by several characteristics. It empowers both parties in the

mother-child duality. Complexity, diversity, fluidity, and responsiveness to the physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects of the relationship are all evident in transformative power relationships. (Porter, *Transformative XIV*)

Four key themes emerge from Marie's work, providing the basis for her concept of "transformative power in motherwork." The first is "master narratives" of motherhood, shaped by and enacted through cultural representations, family structure, education, paid employment, and religion. A key theme connecting all these elements of the master narrative of motherhood is the underlying assumption of obedience. The second is "incipient agency," which emerged through participants' self-reflections on master narratives and assumptions of obedience:

[This is] a conceptual tool to show how the women thought they would mother at this stage in their life—the period before they became mothers. The term "incipient agency" refers to the degree of affirmation or resistance to the master narratives of motherhood present in each interviewee's practical and/or discursive consciousness before she became a mother. The level of awareness is revealed in her ideas and intentions, but they do not constitute agency. Agency, however, was strongly influenced by such ideas and it is possible to observe the likely agentic position of an interviewee toward their future motherhood in this way.

Like the bulb in the ground in winter, the flower was not yet there. As the bulb shapes the flower, so did an interviewee's ideas about, and intentions of, mothering influence her subsequent motherwork. Because they had formed ideas on which they believed they could base their style of motherwork, their motherwork agency can be said to be in an incipient stage. (Porter, *Transformative 86–87*)

Marie uses this orientation and conceptualized point of inquiry to explore the change in mothers' thoughts and beliefs from their premothering ideals and their perceptions based on the lived reality of their mothering experiences. Through analyzing this change, Marie identifies how participants developed and exercised "agentic skills as they carried out their motherwork" (Porter, *Transformative 241*) even when they were experiencing constraint because of institutional and social factors.

Connected to participants' enactment and practicing of incipient agency, the next theme is experiences of constraint in the context of participants' transitions to motherhood, specifically throughout pregnancy, birth, and an initial coming home period that participants experienced with their babies.

Through this theme of constraint, Marie concludes as follows:

In pregnancy, labour and birthing, and the subsequent time in hospital, the interviewees were so constrained by the powers wielded over them that their development of agency was restricted. Having trusted in master narratives of motherhood that presented mothering as a desirable and happy state, achieved by relying on the knowledge and support of the health system, this first encounter with motherhood was not what most of the women had expected.

The young women were disempowered by strategies of isolation, lack of knowledge, and the training they had had in obedience. Every one of these negative experiences acted to emphasise to the “becoming” mother that she was not in control of her own body. When some mothers resisted, if someone from the medical hierarchy learned about it, the mother was chastised as if she were a child. The treatment most of them received supports the claim by maternal scholars that the mother was to be controlled and told what to do (Porter, *Transformative* 126).

The fourth theme explores how mothers took their first steps in developing their motherwork and how participants navigated and resisted the master narratives of motherhood that they had been enculturated into. Master narratives of motherhood portrayed the good mother and rendered the adaptation, skill building, and work required in learning how to mother invisible:

If a woman was not a good mother, then she was a bad mother who could be blamed for a wide variety of social problems (Ruddick 1989:31-3). This meant that when participants had any challenges or in any way fell outside of the “good mother” ideal, they experienced significant feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and guilt. A significant contradiction, occasioned by the bad/good mother narratives is apparent from the contradiction in the belief that mothers, according to the social conventions, were supposed to know instinctively how to nurture, yet, when problems did occur they were expected to seek advice from some “expert.” (Porter, *Transformative* 131)

It was through their navigation, resistance, and development of mothering skills that participants practised and honed their motherwork and emphasized how it is verbally lauded but is given no monetary value. Therefore, motherwork is excluded from the economic system and becomes invisible (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 133). Participants navigated constraining contexts through their skilled motherwork and when they were not able to navigate a barrier successfully, they continued to draw on their agency where

possible to alleviate the barrier's impacts.

Marie discusses multiple strategies that mothers drew on in developing their motherwork within the context of the relationships with their children and broader contexts. All related to power in some way and included adapting work patterns to cope with heavier loads of motherwork; they used creative skills and creative processes, negotiated priorities, sought support in diverse areas from different people, and refined adaptation skills.

Some participants felt that their relationships with their children and their motherwork were not necessarily adversely affected by external restraint or context, and some described the development of their motherwork and the transformative power relationships with their children as emergent in response to situations where they saw their relationships with their children threatened in some way.

There were also a small group of participants who felt that their relationships with their children were impeded significantly, and these mothers suffered as a result. Within this group of mothers, some suffered repeated violence, alcohol abuse and financial injustice, had a child with a disability, and one was geographically isolated with a gravely ill husband. Marie frames these mothers' experiences within broader contexts of patriarchal law and culture and systemic violence. Mothers found ways to draw on strategies of resistance and survival that included a greater emphasis on prioritizing paid work, getting support and seeking out knowledge, and engaging in their processes of reflexivity: "These reflexively devised strategies can be conceptualized as: taking 'time out,' hiding, emotional distancing, and redefining meaning. With the exception of time out, these strategies were practiced only by the individual mother" (Porter, *Transformative* 229). From analyzing the mothers' stories, contexts, and interview themes, Marie develops the concept of transformative power in motherwork. She says of her participants: "They were oppressed as a social group and many were also oppressed as individuals. In arguing for what the mothers did do, for how and what they achieved despite the oppressive context, I am highlighting their strength and determination and giving prominence to the power and agency they did have (Porter, *Transformative* 241).

Marie's Concept of Transformative Power in Motherwork

In developing the concept of transformative power in motherwork, Marie draws on Rich's distinction between the institution of motherhood and the experience and role of being a mother and incorporates Ruddick's theorizing on the practice of mothering and maternal thinking. In Marie's theory of transformative power in motherwork, she centres a mother's agency and positions it in the context of motherhood (Rich), as engaging in the practice of mothering (Ruddick) but as developed as motherwork and produced

through transformative power relationships between mothers and their children:

These mothers developed diverse agentic skills as they moved from practice to discursive consciousness. Even though mothers, whose transformative power was clearly impeded, were creative and, like other mothers, they developed diverse agentic skills, they took strategic actions to preserve and extend as far as possible their limited capacities to develop their relationship with each child.... The mothers recognised the flaws in the 1950s and 1960s ways of mothering, but they also recognised their own capabilities and developed them. (Porter, *Transformative* 241)

Through caring for, attuning to, and building relationships with their children (i.e., motherwork), mothers developed “diverse agentic skills as they moved from practice to discursive consciousness” (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 241). Mothers recognized and named the transformation that they had been through and spoke about the knowledge and skills that they had gained, including “their increasing capability to be flexible, to listen and watch with a heightened awareness of both the spoken and the unspoken body language of the ‘other’ individual. Several women spoke of a renewed consciousness of the sacred” (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 242).

Importantly, in the naming of motherwork and the transformative power of motherwork, Marie draws on a mother-centric lens. Motherwork is an active practice and is adapted across the lifespan of the mother and her children. This has benefits for both mothers and children:

The love that developed within the transformative power relationship not only benefited the children, but also transformed the emotional life of the mother. The permanency and the flexibility of love that is characteristic of this relationship is formed by the strong emotional, intimate and long-term bonds that are created in the mother and child relationship. Although the nature of the relationship changes radically as the child becomes an independent adult and the mother’s involvement gradually lessens, the bonds that tie the relationship together slacken rather than break. (Porter, *Transformative* 243)

The grounded theory of transformative power in motherwork is characterized by the following four features:

1. Attention to the power dynamics that exist between mothers and children. Mothers are attuned to the unique needs of their child/ren physically, intellectually, and emotionally, but power operates in diverse, complex, fluid, and flexible ways within the relationship.

2. Understanding that transformative power within relationships is shaped by both master narratives and structural and social constraints. Mothers have different capacities to develop their relationships of transformative power in motherwork with each child.
3. Mothers responded to contextual limitations and did so through their motherwork. They were “transformed” not merely by their being in a relationship with their children but by/through their own agency, as they encountered institutional constraints that limited their motherwork.
4. Mothers developed a counter narrative through their own transformation, which was “revealed not only in the telling of their stories but in their discursive/reflexive practices as mothers. They had the ability to understand the societal value of their work and to maintain a belief in its value despite the lack of legitimation from society” (Porter, *Transformative* 234).

As indicated within the fourth feature, an important part of the concept of transformative power in motherwork includes the mothers’ building of agentic skills and the creation of a counter-narrative to the culturally prevailing master narrative of motherhood. This master narrative incorporates the imagery, archetype, and ideology of the good mother, who is happy, serene, and mothers instinctively and whose children are equally happy, content, serene, and obedient. However, Marie notes the following:

Master narratives that constantly showed positive images of happy mothers and babies quickly were seen by the new mothers to be false stories when compared with the real experiences of motherhood. This awareness combined with the workload, the need to learn new skills, the anxiety that being totally responsible for a new and precious life generated, and the lack of sleep ensured that the women moved further into discursive consciousness as they questioned the master narrative images. Their experiences contradicted the image of the mother who instinctively understood motherwork and who was depicted as the calm, in-control mother of the perfect baby. The mothers on the basis of their experience of mothering could not support the idea that mothering was not time-consuming and demanding work. (Porter, *Transformative Power* 250)

In developing a counter-narrative to the master one, several features emerged from participants’ experiences as avenues through which mothers resisted dominant narratives:

1. They recognized that romanticized cultural portrayals of marriage and motherhood were false.

2. They spoke about the physicality of being a mother and critiqued the impact of the medical system on their births and labour.
3. They resisted the assertion that motherwork was instinctive and instead spoke about their need for support and new learning.
4. They spoke about developing motherwork as a skill that was ongoing, developing, and in an active state.
5. They recognized that motherwork did not have a high social value, but they still valued their motherwork highly.
6. They recognized the ways that motherwork is affected by broader social and institutional contexts.

Marie's Maternal Scholarship, Legacy, and Future Directions

Marie brought together maternal theory and lived experience throughout her research and writing, her lived experience as a mother, and her career as an academic and mentor. Through the development of the theory of transformative power in motherwork, Marie offered an avenue through which mothers can draw on, narrate, celebrate, describe, and advocate for how their practice of mothering—motherwork—transformed them, their children, and the broader world. When mothers are living within the patriarchal context of the institution of motherhood (Rich), they face constraints on their agency and limitation of choice, yet they also find avenues for resistance and transformation through their practising of motherwork and, therefore, the transformative power relationships that they have with their children:

We need to record women's views of history and, where master narratives that purport to tell the stories of our lives are erroneous, we need to tell a counter narrative based in the reality we experience. Mothers and the work they do have been disregarded for too many years. Women in general, and mothers in particular, need to recognize the strength of their motherline and the valuable transformative relationships of power that exist and are expressed in motherwork. There are capacities and opportunities for power in motherwork. These may be unacknowledged, but they cannot be denied. (Porter, *Motherwork* 250)

To finish with Marie's words:

We all have understanding, depths, and skills that have developed from the challenges we faced. I have been well supported by other mothers—family, friends, and acquaintances. As a result, I know so many strong, talented mothers. I have great respect for mothers. It is

my dream to have society similarly recognize and respect the value of mothers and their motherwork. (Porter, “A Mother” 119)

We hope that we have inspired you with some of Marie’s insights and expertise, and you feel infused by some of the wisdom she gained and honed through her practice of motherwork. To consider integrating motherhood studies within your own lived experience of mothering and/or work within this space, we encourage you to reflect on the master narrative that is most prominent in your culture and context. How may this master narrative have influenced your perceptions of mothers or experience as a mother? Marie Porter’s work highlights how a mother’s agency and agentic skills can be drawn on to navigate institutional or social constraints. You may like to consider how you have witnessed this in your own life or work, along with Marie’s concept of incipient agency in how premothering ideas and intentions can influence motherwork. We hope that together our communities and professional spheres can achieve Marie’s dream of a society that recognizes and respects the value of mothers and their motherwork.

Endnotes

1. AM, Member of the Order of Australia is an award which recognizes and honours Australian citizens for outstanding achievement and service. Only 605 Australian citizens are awarded the Member of the Order of Australia each year.

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Alys Einion is a midwife, author, educator, novelist, and activist for women and childbearing people's rights in maternity care. As an academic, she champions students in midwifery, nursing, and healthcare and implements projects to improve inclusive education and student support, with a specialism in LGBT+ inclusion. As an inclusive feminist researcher, she researches the history, philosophy, and ethics of midwifery, supports PhD students studying midwifery and reproduction, and writes about spirituality, narratives, and diversity in childbearing and families. She is the editor-in-chief of the *Practising Midwife Journal* and a coeditor or author of several books. Her novels reflect her interests in lived experience, women's rights, and goddess-based spirituality. She is the creator of centred birth hypnobirthing and centred hypnofertility and advocates for the use of hypnosis in midwifery and nursing, particularly for women's health. She is also a pagan chaplain, and a vegan, and a Fellow of the Royal College of Midwives.

Veronica Frigeni received her PhD in Italian from the University of Kent (2018). She has held research positions at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and served as a visiting scholar at Central European University in Vienna and the University of Cambridge. Currently, she is a virtual visiting scholar at the Centre for Feminist Research at York University. Frigeni has authored a monograph on Antonio Tabucchi and has contributed chapters on transcultural feminist writers, Giorgio Agamben, postcolonial ecofeminism, matricentric feminism, queer parenting, reproductive justice, and trauma. She is a coeditor of the forthcoming volumes *Telling Lives: Mothers and Life Writing* (Demeter Press 2026) and *Womb Wor(l)ds: Transcultural Echoes on Reproductive Justice* (Demeter Press 2026). She is the Italian translator of *Maternità femministe* by Andrea O'Reilly (Prospero 2025) and the English translator of Orsola Severini's novel *Il consolo* (Demeter Press 2025). Veronica serves on the editorial board of the *Critical Gender Studies Journal*.

Marcella Gemelli is a teaching professor and director of the online masters program in Sociology in the T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University. She taught courses in women and gender studies and currently teaches undergraduate and graduate Sociology courses. She takes a special interest in online course and program development, from establishing an introduction to women's studies course in a hybrid format to being an invited presenter at the American Sociological Association Director of Graduate Studies Preconference for directing the online MA in sociology. She has conducted research and written on motherhood published in *Gender Issues* and *New Maternalisms: Tales of Motherwork (Dislodging the Unthinkable)*, completed a book review published in *Gender & Society*, and is a regular reviewer for the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. She is a member of the American Sociological Association and Sociologists for Women in Society.

Michelle Hughes Miller is a feminist criminologist and professor in women's, Gender, and sexuality studies at the University of South Florida. She analyzes constructions of mothers and "bad mothers" in law, policy, and media and the experiences of mothers and mothering within academe. She recently published an edited book with Taylor & Francis (2024), *Criminalizing Motherhood and Reproduction*, and with Olga Marques, she is currently coediting the volume *Incarcerated (M)others* for Demeter Press (2025). She previously coedited *Bad Mothers: Regulations, Representations and Resistance* (Demeter, 2017). Her research has been published in edited volumes, including *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood* ("The Governance of Mothers") and *Writing Mothers* ("Grandmothering in Remission"), along with multiple journals, including *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* ("Gender Differences in Tenure-Track Faculty Time Spent on Childcare") and *Women & Criminal Justice*

(“Decentering Motherhood”). Her career goal has been to integrate motherhood studies into feminist criminological research.

Andrea O’Reilly is internationally recognized as the founder of motherhood studies (2006) and its subfield maternal theory (2007) and the creator of matricentric feminism, a feminism for and about mothers (2016) and matricritics, a literary theory and practice for reading mother-focussed texts (2021). She is a full 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 the coeditor, editor, and author of thirty-five plus books on many motherhood topics. Her most recent titles include *Care(ful) Relationships between Mothers and the Caregivers They Hire*, *The Mother Wave: Theorizing, Enacting, and Representing Matricentric Feminism* and *The Missing Mother, In (M)otherwords; Writings on Mothering and Motherhood, 2009–2024* (all published in 2024) along with *Gone Feral: Unruly Women and the Undoing of Normative Femininity* (2025). She has published fifteen chapters with several more planned on mother-centred novels/memoirs that will be published in the monograph *Matricritics as Literary Theory and Criticism: Reading the Maternal in Post-2010 Women’s Narratives*.

Rachel Williamson is an academic and educator based in Aotearoa New Zealand. She has worked in the education sector for nearly two years and currently teaches the English, cultural studies, and cinema studies programs at the University of Canterbury. Her work focusses on women’s embodied experiences of motherhood and gender-based violence and considers how these are informed by and represented in popular culture, film, television, and literature. She is the author of *21st-Century Representations of Maternal Ambivalence* published in 2023 by Palgrave Macmillan as part of their (Re) Presenting Gender series, and has published academic articles on contemporary popular culture representations of mother-daughter relations, Indigenous motherhood, and maternal regret. She is a frequent commentator and reviewer for the popular press. In addition to her academic expertise, Williamson has experience working as a policy advisor and educator within the domestic/family violence sector.

Contributors

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Camila Infanger Almeida is a PhD candidate (3rd year DPhil) in political science at the University of São Paulo (USP) and a recognized student in the Latin American Centre at Oxford University. She is a member of the Parent in Science Movement and a mother of two. Her research involves the dynamics around inclusive policies within the scientific realm, with a special focus on motherhood-related ones. She is a member of the Public Policy Centre (NUPPs) and she is funded by the Brazilian government agency CAPES.

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Sophie Brock is a sociologist and mother living in Sydney, Australia. Her work explores how broader social constructs shape individual mothers' experiences. Sophie works autonomously creating online education programs for mothers and practitioners, mentors professionals working with mothers, and hosts the podcast *The Good Enough Mother*.

Beverly Buchanan, a native of Nova Scotia, Canada, earned a bachelor's degree in biology from Gallaudet University before pursuing two master's

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Lauren E. Burrow is a professor of education studies at Stephen F. Austin State University and a MotherScholar to three growing children. She is eternally grateful to the arts (and artists) that helped her find joy and creativity during the early years of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to reembracing creative writing and other arts-based methodology to share her scholarship, she currently fills her heart by performing on stage at her local theatre.

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Tara Carpenter Estrada is an associate professor of art education at Brigham Young University. Her research focuses on how artists, teachers, and mothers navigate the intersections between overlapping but separate roles and responsibilities. Tara has coedited two books about art and motherhood: *An Artist and a Mother* and *Give and Take: Motherhood and Creative Practice*. Awards include “Excellence in Teaching” from her college and “Utah Art Educator of Year” from the Utah Art Education Association.

Carolina Dantas de Figueiredo is a professor in the Postgraduate Program in Social Communication at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE). She has a PhD in communication (UFPE). She was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS) in Bochum, Germany (2017). She is a member of the Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project at UFPE and a mother of two. Her research focusses on digital environments and artificial intelligence.

Kasturi Ghosh (she/her) is a PhD candidate in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo (UW), ON, Canada. Her research studies contemporary gothic fiction of the American South as the outcome of homogeneous identities and boundaries forced upon the region and the uncanny reemergence of its inherent plural characteristics, focussing on the portrayal of vampires and other monstrous entities created by Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite, and Charlaine Harris. Kasturi has received SSHRC and OGS awards and the UW President's Award for her research, as well as other institutional and departmental awards. Before joining UW for her PhD in 2020, Kasturi served as an assistant professor of English for eight years in her home country, India. She has published papers in peer-reviewed journals and presented at international and national seminars and conferences. Her interests are gothic studies, gender studies, popular literature and culture, and adaptation studies.

Ashley Greene earned her Doctor of Education (EdD) in Deaf studies and Deaf education from Lamar University in 2020. With fifteen years of experience teaching at all levels, from pre-K to PhD, she is dedicated to shaping the educational experiences of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. As a first-generation college graduate and an assistant professor, Dr. Greene has overcome significant challenges as the only Deaf member of her family. Additionally, as a divorced mother of two children of Deaf adults (CODAs), she pursued all three of her degrees while balancing the demands of parenting. Her personal and professional experiences provide her with unique insights into the struggles that students may face, particularly those who juggle education, family responsibilities, and financial pressures. Dr. Greene is passionate about mentorship and advocacy, ensuring that students—especially those from underrepresented backgrounds—receive the support they need to succeed.

Anna M. Hennessey, PhD, is a San Francisco-based scholar, writer, artist, and mother with an interdisciplinary background in religious studies, art history, and philosophy. She has written widely for academic and broader audiences on pregnancy, birth, rebirth, and mothering. In addition to her academic publications, which include a book, her work has been published in magazines, newspapers, and blogs, and she has given podcast and radio interviews. Hennessey's *Rebirth Tunnel Immersive Art Installation*, for which she received a 2024 grant from the American Academy of Religion, has been exhibited in Las Vegas and San Francisco.

Audrey Hilligoss is an assistant professor of art education at Bowling Green State University, working with undergraduate preservice and graduate in-service art teachers. She received a BS in art education from Miami University, an MA in art education from Arizona State University, and a PhD in arts administration, education, and policy from Ohio State University. Hilligoss's

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Sandra Houghton is a graduate student completing her MA in Art Education at Brigham Young University, where she integrates her experience as an art teacher and mother of six children into her research. Sandra's work in curriculum development emphasizes the connection between craft and artistic expression, aiming to inspire students to explore and appreciate this relationship in their creative practices.

Jenny Jones is a mother, grandmother, wife, and retired clinical ethicist. Her PhD *Composing Maternal Identities: The Living Realities of Mothers with Young Adult-Children in 21st Century*, was written within matricentric feminist and applied ethics frameworks. Marie was her very close friend and mentor.

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Zixuan Liao (she/her) is a PhD student in interdisciplinary humanities at Brock University in Ontario. Zixuan's research interests span a range of interdisciplinary fields, including motherhood studies, feminist theory, image studies, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and semiotics. Her doctoral project explores the contemporary representations of the mother-daughter relationship in images created by daughter artists. This research also seeks to influence societal perceptions of motherhood, family dynamics, and gender roles beyond academia.

Heidi MacGlaughlin has been an educator in Deaf education for over twenty years, specializing in early language acquisition, ASL/English bilingual education, family literacy, and fingerspelling. She holds multiple certifications, including E-12 Deaf and Hard of Hearing, E-12 ASL, Principal, ASL/English Bilingual Early Childhood Education, and ACUE Effective Teaching Practices. She earned her doctorate from Lamar University in 2018 and currently serves as the program coordinator for the Deaf Education Program at McDaniel College. Dr. MacGlaughlin has presented at national and international conferences on Deaf identity, literacy, and language acquisition. She has served on the Associate of College Educators-Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ACE-DHH) Board and consults with Language First. Passionate about advancing bilingual education and supporting families of Deaf children, she continues to advocate for best practices in early language development. Beyond her professional work, she is a dedicated supporter of her teenage son's swimming career and enjoys travelling.

Angelica Martinez is a Mexican scholar with a PhD in arts, technology, and emerging communication from the University of Texas at Dallas. Her research investigates the impact of emerging technologies on workers' identities. Her dissertation, *The New Work of Motherhood: Technocapitalism and Postpartum Labor*, examines the discourses surrounding new technologies aimed at postpartum mothers and their evolving notions of motherhood and labour. She currently serves as the speaker series coordinator at the LaborTech Network.

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Oksana Moroz, PhD, is an assistant professor of English and director of writing at Messiah University. Her research interests revolve around gender and digital identities of English language teachers and multilingual students, motherhood and academia, writing assessment, language ideologies, and accents. Oksana's essay "A Poetic Narrative Autoethnography on Transnational Identity: Tumbleweed" appeared in the edited collection of *Doctoral Students' Identities and Emotional Wellbeing in Applied Linguistics* (Yazan, Trinh, & Pentón Herrera, 2023). She has also published in *Composition Forum*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Explorations in English Language and Linguistics*, *Praxis*, *TESOL Journal*, and *Internationalisation of Higher Education*.

Ariel Moy is an academic teacher, doctoral supervisor, and arts-based researcher at the MIECAT Institute in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia. She also has a private arts therapeutic practice specializing in mother-child relationships and has published, presented, and facilitated workshops nationally and internationally on arts-based research and the mother-child "us." Emerging from her doctoral research, the "us" is a term that speaks to experiencing as relationship, becoming more than mother and child in a generative yet accessible way.

Tammy Nyden, PhD, is an associate professor of philosophy at Grinnell College. She is the author of *Spinoza's Radical Cartesian Mind* (Continuum, 2007); the coeditor of *Cartesian Empiricisms* (Springer 2013); and the author of several articles on Spinoza, Dutch Cartesianism, and the history and philosophy of early modern science. She has been awarded fellowships from the Fulbright Program, The American Council of Learned Societies, the

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Kimberly Pudans-Smith earned her doctorate in Deaf studies and Deaf education from Lamar University in 2019. With over thirty years of experience teaching ASL, Deaf studies, and linguistics at various universities, she has been passionate about language acquisition and empowering students to reach their full potential. As a first-generation college graduate from a third-generation Deaf family, Kim has navigated and overcome numerous challenges, shaping her dedication to education and advocacy. She was a pioneer in developing the first-ever online sign language courses and created a platform for learners to discover new signs weekly. Beyond her academic contributions, she has traveled internationally to develop curricula and pedagogical strategies for Deaf individuals in third-world countries, ensuring communication access and vocational training opportunities. Now enjoying a new chapter, Kim spends her time at home with her husband and teenage son, embracing family life and future possibilities.

Lisa Raith has a PhD investigating first-time mothers' experiences. She is a practising psychologist based on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia, and works with clients of all ages, addressing mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, autism spectrum disorder, and ADHD. Lisa is dedicated to combining research and practice to support individuals in becoming their best selves.

Lea Schupak is a licensed psychotherapist and writer based in New York City. She obtained a dual master's degree in counselling psychology and mental health counselling at Teachers College, Columbia University. She holds an advanced graduate certificate in sexuality, women, and gender, with a focus on reproductive and maternal wellbeing (more specifically studying cross-cultural experiences of women who had experienced pregnancy and infant loss). Her clinical practice is currently focussed on perinatal and women's mental health, reproductive identity, and relationships. She is currently deepening her knowledge of contemporary child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapy at the Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research in New York.

Yoonha Shin's life was changed by preterm premature rupture of the membranes (PPROM). After losing her baby Huckleberry to PPRM, she

resigned from her college faculty position and sought to process her loss by reading and writing. She now works as a graduate student career specialist at Princeton University and continues to write about her research interests, which include reproductive justice, feminist politics and activism, academic quit lit, and postdoctoral career transition. She received her PhD in English from the University at Buffalo (SUNY), and her essays have appeared in *Representing Abortion*, an anthology from Routledge, and *Inside Higher Ed*.

Robin Silbergleid is the author of several books on single motherhood and infertility, including the memoir *Texas Girl* (Demeter Press, 2014) and *The Baby Book: Poems* (CavanKerry). With collaborators on the international art, oral history, and portraiture project The ART of Infertility, she is coeditor of *Infertilities, A Curation* (Wayne State), which won the Midwest Book Award for Health. She lives with her children in East Lansing, Michigan, where she is a professor of English and associate chair for undergraduate studies at Michigan State University.

Lucy Tyler is an associate professor of performance practices at the University of Reading. She is a somatic movement facilitator, performance maker, dramaturg, and scholar. As a performance maker, Lucy currently makes screendances exploring m/othering, ecosomatics, and remains. Lucy's scholarly work analyses embodied and creative artistic processes, focussing on how artists and writers develop themselves and their work. She is the author of numerous articles and chapters on performance development and the forthcoming *English Play Development under Neoliberalism* (CUP, 2024). She is the principal investigator on the Arts Council-Funder Work in Progress (UoR/South Street), which seed funds and facilitates new performance-making. Lucy is the founding codirector of Elements Eco Soma Lab, an intermedial movement research project.

Jennifer Weaver earned her PhD in developmental psychology at the University of California, Irvine, in 2009. Following a postdoctoral position at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, she joined the Department of Psychological Science at Boise State University in Idaho in 2012. Now an associate professor working remotely, she teaches courses on child development and conducts research and writing on maternal psychology.

Marya Zarif is a Syrian Canadian multidisciplinary creator. She is an author, illustrator, designer, screenwriter, and filmmaker specializing in cinema and multiplatform content, with over fifteen years of experience in youth media. In 2020, she created, wrote, and co-directed her first youth animated web series, *Dounia*, broadcast on *Le SQUAT* (Télé-Québec) and numerous channels and platforms worldwide. The series received multiple awards in Quebec and internationally. From this series, *Dounia and the Princess of Aleppo* became her

first feature film. Created and written by Marya, and co-directed with André Kadi, the film is the first animated feature intended for children and general audiences to address the global issue of migration. The film was released in theaters in France on February 1, 2023, and in Quebec in April 2023. Its sequel, *Dounia and the Great White North*, which tells the story of Dounia's encounter with her new homeland, has been touring festivals since 2024 and is set for theatrical release in France in March 2025.



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