Personal Reflections and Collective Resistance:

Motherhood and Caregiving at the intersection of PhD pursuits

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**Introduction**

The corporatization of academia has resulted in a focus on productivity, competitiveness, and a shift towards market orientation and managerialism (Amsler & Motta, 2019; Fotaki, 2013; Gay, 2004; Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Ollilainen, 2020). An implicit requirement of academia necessitates that PhD students put their academic work ahead of everything else. Therefore, the “academic workplace functions around traditions that follow a male professor’s life course” (Ollilainen, 2020, p. 961). As such, it is not surprising that calls for studies on motherhood in academia have increased in recent years, due to the very complex relationship these so-called ‘dualities’ hold (e.g., Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). We argue that the complex relationship between motherhood and PhD students in academia needs to be surfaced to create a diverse ‘feminist archive’ of experiences, struggles, and joys.

According to Amsler and Motta (2019), academics and mothers inhabit competing worlds and subjectivities. Performing the role of the ideal academic often requires a splitting between the embodied, feeling self and the mental, rational self (Fotaki, 2013). The gendering of institutional structures and practices (Acker, 1990; Fotaki, 2013), prioritizes the male body in academia. Consequently, the ideal academic is constructed as a *productive* self rather than a *reproductive* self, relegating reproductive functions as an obstacle to productivity and academic success (Spivak, 1998). For instance, academia has historically perceived pregnancy as an impediment to scholarly output and tenure (Ollilainen, 2020). Also, Williams (2005) suggests that a pregnant body triggers a set of biases called the “maternal wall” (p. 97), classifying mothers as incompatible to the “24/7 worker model” (p. 99). Moreover, engagement in researching, writing, and publishing have resulted in the encroachment of work into family life (Lynch, 2006), blurring the boundaries between the personal and the professional (Turner & Norwood, 2013).

Within academia, women continue to have more caregiving responsibilities than men (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018), resulting in a lack of uninterrupted thinking space required for academic work. Mothers continue to juggle between several identity categories, creating ambivalent relationships and contradictions (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). According to﻿ Huopalainen and Satama (2019), mothers in academia are required to negotiate between several tension points. For example, mothers continue to negotiate between the mobile researcher and the immobile mother at home. Mothers also negotiate between the neoliberal self-discipline of committing to intellectual work, while being present for the spontaneity and uncertainty that comes with motherhood and caregiving. Huopalainen and Satama (2019) argue, however, that the simultaneous commitment to motherhood and academia could be seen as a form of resistance to prevailing cultural norms and expectations that reify these domains as separate and impenetrable.

“Struggles to open the academy to people whose lives do not conform to hegemonic models of the bourgeois, entrepreneurial white, male scholar are ongoing” (Amsler & Motta, 2019, p. 84). In an effort to deconstruct those hegemonic models in academia, we, a group of PhD students and recent graduates, reflect on our experiences with motherhood/caregiving at the intersection of pursuing a PhD. We are a group of 6 women and 1 man,[[1]](#footnote-1) from different backgrounds. We share common threads in that we all belong/belonged to the same PhD program located in Atlantic Canada, and we are all parents to children in various age categories. The paper emerged from our collaborative discussions and stories we’ve shared with one another over the years. We are a part of a collective virtual group chat, and we’ve seen first-hand how our personal struggles blend with our academic ones. And so, we add our voices and reflections to continue to deconstruct the dialectic between academia and motherhood, while also being critical of the neoliberal endeavor that has separated the personal from the professional. In doing so, we attempt to build a feminist consciousness around academic work and motherhood; whilst striving for an ethics of care (Tronto, 2010).

**Writing Differently**

Aligned with feminist traditions of writing differently (Brewis, 2005; Gilmore et al., 2019; Grey & Sinclair, 2006; Mandalaki, 2020; Pullen, 2018), we push back against masculinist conventions of the academy by writing from an embodied place. We inject the I in our writing for purposes of collective storytelling. As such, we blend between the I and the we, as we oscillate between personal reflections and collective resistance (Ahonen et al., 2020). “﻿We use our individual ‘I's and subjectivities with all the peculiarities, emotions, messiness, fragility and vulnerability that they carry to construct a sense of *we*ness and togetherness (Ahonen et al., 2020, p. 448). “‘Writing differently’ is concerned with broadening, widening and deepening knowledge and understanding by giving our ideas space in which they can flourish, create new meanings, help us learn and become human (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 4). We do so through continuous dialogue and discussion with one another, and adopting a methodological praxis that reinserts the body and the mind into scholarship (Spry, 2001).

By writing differently, we challenge canonical ways of doing research (Ellis et al., 2011), we resist sterile and objectified ways of writing about the self (Jamjoom, 2020), and we overturn exclusionary practices of academia which only speaks to a privileged few (Grey & Sinclair, 2006). According to Spivak (1998), academia is entrenched in the privatization of strong feelings and emotions, which results in omissions of various modes of knowing and feeling – silencing women, motherhood, and only offering a linear conception of what production and value mean in our economies and institutions (Ozkazanc‐Pan & Pullen, 2020; Spivak, 1998).

In what follows, we offer our multiple perspectives as individual reflections. These fragments of our PhD experiences suggest how neoliberal thinking is not only embedded in our institutions, but also embedded in our minds. So, motherhood is fraught with many pressures especially as it relates to what is considered ‘real work,’ defined by many as transactional, wage-driven, and based on capitalist assumptions of accumulation (Spivak, 1998) .

**Reflection 1: Opportunity Cost**

In 2014, I had moved from Saudi Arabia to Canada with my husband and almost 2-year-old son. The move represented a space of transition and possibility, a place where I could somehow accomplish the goals I wanted – one of them being completing a PhD. As a new mother, juggling between motherhood and self-aspirations became a daily struggle. I thought of everything I wanted to pursue, but somehow felt constricted by thoughts of motherhood, with all it entails from physical and emotional labor – the positive and tiring sides of new motherhood (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019). Could I really pursue and finish a PhD in the allotted time, while still trying to build a family? It felt incongruent. At first, I was completely perplexed with how career or academic pursuits clashed with women’s reproductive years in very obvious ways. Those feelings were even more pronounced, when I became pregnant with my second child during my 2nd year of the PhD program. The joys of being pregnant were joined by thoughts of “opportunity costs” (Joshi, 1998). What is the cost of this pregnancy on my PhD trajectory? How many more months or years need to be added to the process? What do I need to *not* pursue now that I am pregnant?

In microeconomics, opportunity costs are defined as the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen (Buchanan, 1991; Joshi, 1998). According to James Buchanan (1991, p. 520):

The concept of opportunity cost (or alternative cost) expresses the basic relationship between scarcity and choice. If no object or activity that is valued by anyone is scarce, all demands for all persons and in all periods can be satisfied. There is no need to choose among separately valued options; there is no need for social coordination processes that will effectively determine which demands have priority. In this fantasized setting without scarcity, there are no opportunities or alternatives that are missed, forgone, or sacrificed.

In reading Buchanan’s (1991) work, I understood that I, too, was thinking in neoliberal terms – that I divided my intersectional identities as a mother and PhD student in terms of a profit-loss ratio. Don’t get me wrong, motherhood is a blessing and I feel privileged to have been able to complete a PhD while raising two young children. However, the truth of the matter is that we are not in a fantasized setting, and we are still a part of a system that requires a balancing act. I couldn’t just ‘lean in’ at every opportunity because I had to be realistic. I had to think carefully between short-term and long-term gains. *And capitalist thinking still continues…is there a way to break free from these tropes when we have lived and experienced them for so long? What is the alternative?*

**Reflection 2: I Really Can’t Do it All**

My PhD nearly killed me. No, serious, it did. I found myself in hospital in 2016 after my second residency. I was in the midst of writing “conference-ready” research papers with looming deadlines and with comprehensive exams on the horizon. I was running a high-profile non-profit, charitable organization, while also trying to be a good mom to my two little boys, just 7 and 9 years old. Combining a PhD with motherhood, a fulltime leadership role and volunteer commitments is a recipe for disaster. There I was, in hospital, with a catastrophic new diagnosis of a life-threatening autoimmune disease. My new constant companions of stress and anxiety had manifested into chronic physical illness. And I was lucky. Though at risk for organ failure, I was responding well to medicine.

I scared the hell out of my family. The look of my boys, seeing me in hospital was so profoundly heartbreaking. I had convinced them that I could do anything. Sure, I missed soccer practices. Their dad cooked all the meals and did all the shopping. I selfishly took copious time for myself to read and write, sometimes resenting when their homework or needs usurped my own. I had stopped reading for pleasure because the pressure to constantly read scholarship was so intense. I would find myself in front of my computer at 3:30 am because I had woken up in the middle of the night and started to craft an argument in my head and realized I better get it down before I forgot something brilliant. My stay in hospital was a wakeup call, but no relief from the pressures of my life. I simply needed to find a better way, somehow.

**Reflection 3: Rejecting the Divide: Bringing Care to Work**

As a child, I learned to enter my father’s study quietly, and to stand silently at his desk until he stopped scratching his pencil on a long yellow pad of paper. “Just let me finish this thought,” he would say. Then you could ask your question. He was kindly and warm, but it was transactional. You didn’t ask him to leave his desk, join an activity, or help with time-intensive efforts like homework, hunting for a lost item, or solving a problem. His time was privileged in the family, and childcare was not where it was spent.

My father was an academic, with a divide between work and home structured by his gender, era, and socialization. I reflect on his approach to care, family life, and work in the context of my own PhD journey as a mother with three kids. Care demands relationship. The PhD demands isolation. The scarcity of time will always put the two in conflict, but to simply seek “balance” overlooks a larger challenge before us. The industrial-era divide between public life, with its justice-based morality, and private life focused on relationships and emotional connection in the home (Tronto, 1993) created organizations where rule-based systems replaced historic systems of trust and relationship (Smith, 2005, p.15). This supports the “impoverished” liberal ideal of the individual as “abstract, unencumbered, rational” (Held, 2006, p. 14) and obscures the reality of interdependence of individuals, groups, and our ecological world. Worse, it “may *unfit* people to be anything other than what its justifying theories suppose them to be, ones who have no interest in each others’ interests” (Baier, 1995, quoted in Held, 2006, p.14; emphasis original). I question whether, as we create space for engaged fathering in the home and women’s full participation in public life, we can also bring care out from the shadows to enrich our organizations and institutions, so they are characterized less by the liberal values of “autonomy, rationality, and reciprocity and increasingly by the “caring” virtues of responsibility, trust, and friendship” (Robinson, 1997, p. 129).

**Reflection 4: Lessons in Letting Go: From an Intersectional Mother in Doctoral Studies**

Deliberately present in the lives of my children, choosing options along the way that allowed me to focus on their well-being made my adult wish of completing a PhD a source of angst. Specifically, because I would not let it happen ‘at their expense. ’Those who ‘knew’ me well, understood that doctoral studies were a long-standing goal which I had chosen to delay and had flirted with at different times over the years. Impatient with life, the doctoral attainment for me was to give freedom to my mind by nurturing in me different and new ways to explore and comprehend the somewhat monotonous world that I had explored regularly as a management consultant and later in management in earlier career days. A world which existed on taken for granted ways ‘to be’ and ‘to do.’

Reflecting on motherhood and doctoral education raised a few significant areas for discussion, foremost because I write from my adopted home, Canada in the West. Born and raised in Jamaica, the approach to “caring” labor from mothers in the early adult years of their children seemed to be longer. A feature of our culture and socialization saw a much tighter ‘community with parent’ approach to child rearing than I experienced in my adoptive country. Furthermore, as a black woman, my active attention to what my children engaged in was a protective response to experiences our family encountered during the elementary and secondary school years which demanded our protective presence in a system that was not always kind, nor fair in its treatment of the ‘Other’ (Said, 1978). My experience and reflecting of the experience of those who are othered in a society by race or ethnic origin, suggested that this late-year protective presence of young adult children was especially important where the society had embedded stereotypes. My children no longer had endless role models of successful people who looked like them, whose expectation of the next generation included higher education leading to professional standing or leadership in private and public roles. Worse, they had at times school personnel whose guidance meant them giving up dreams of careers in areas that their early socialization made normal in favor of other less rewarding endeavours. Or being graded down because they dared to think outside the box to which they had been allocated.

Despite my children’s supportive responses when polled about my intention to return to school, I struggled with the decision. How could I pull it all together and make sense (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) of the changes/challenges in my role as mother in our family ‘organization’ where I largely still held the ‘second shift’ (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Finding purpose for and in the journey provided the backdrop against which I made the clear choice to embark on my PhD journey.

As I complete my dissertation, I have found a home – *Writing differently.* I surprised myself when journaling recently with the discovery that I am a Critical scholar, embracing all that the descriptor signifies. My ‘children’ will have survived and are well on the way to their own charted paths happily undisturbed by the “helicopter” mom who had taken a leap of faith and stepped into a new life of discovery and purpose. As they watched me navigate this academic journey it meant for them that I really understood many of the challenges they faced while engaged in tertiary study in a space where the black body isn’t always welcome. Our conversations at home began to change. Witnessing my negotiation and determination to scale the hurdles thrown in my way I hope has been encouraging as they consider pursuing further postgraduate work themselves

**Reflection 5: Dr. Mom - The Kitchen Table**

My story centres around the kitchen table and how it shaped my experience pursuing my Ph.D. My story began on February 13, 2009, the day I was accepted into the program. It was the same day Jim and I had agreed to our first date, Valentine’s 2009. We were sitting in my office when my office phone rang. I said,” it’s SMU, and it’s after hours. Do you mind if I pick it up?” On the other end of the phone was Dr. Albert Mills, and he started the conversation with “*Welcome to Hollywood*.” I looked up at Jim, and I knew this is my future husband. And so, my journey as a Ph.D. mom begins.

As our relationship progressed, I spent quite a bit of time at our house in Millbrook First Nation, where our four kids Erica (12), Julien (12), Jessica (14) and Jimmy (17), went about their daily teenage lives. I found myself writing daily at the kitchen table. I had choices, I could write in a library, or my office, or a closed room, but I felt I was missing the noises of my life, my kids and my other half, laughing, arguing, wrestling, and sometimes quietly watching TV or sleeping nearby. Those years were so critical, and there were times when the teenage crew just dropped into a chair and wanted to chat or yelled from the other room to ask a question. By writing at the kitchen table, I was a part of the daily living, I was a part of the meals, I was a part of the drama, and there was a lot of drama, but I didn’t miss a thing. I didn’t want to miss out on the social interactions as they were my version of positive mental health and the fear of missing out on these experiences far outweighed any of the disruptions while writing (Elhai, Yang & Montag, 2020). I was there, listening to the sounds of my family, engaging in banter, and sometimes delving out a nugget of advice that I am sure was lost before my kids walked into the next room, but I was there.

I loved the chaos around me. I didn’t need to get fully involved or move. Instead, I could listen to the subtle words and tones and know when it was time for my mom hat to replace my Ph.D. hat. And soon, I became better at wearing both, creating my identity as Dr. Mom (Ryan & Deci, 2000, Koole, Schlinkert, Maldei, & Baumann, 2019). I could write in peace while the sounds of daily life bubbled around me, providing comfort and support. The mini disruptions were breaks without breaking my writing rhythm by getting up. I would sit for hours and hours enjoying my blended life, family, and studies, and I didn’t miss a beat. However, an interesting thing happened along the way. I realized that my kids were learning from me, paying attention to the process at the kitchen table. They were engaged in my studies and asking questions, sometimes rolling their eyes, and sometimes engaging in conversation. My favourite line was from my 14-year-old son Julien when he asked me something about academia. When I started to share my answer, he said, *“let’s just pretend I don’t know what you are talking about,”* we all burst out laughing as I realized they were interested in what I was doing. Still, sometimes I was too far into my academic brain, and it was a reminder to come back to reality for a while to join my family. There was a contagious effect taking place.

Today, I reflect on the process and reflect on how my time at the kitchen table influenced my kids. Erica is completing her master’s in Europe. Jessica is on her second degree with an eye on pursuing her Ph.D. Julien is pursuing a career in early childhood education; Jimmy is an Indigenous Liaison officer with Corrections, teaching other officers about the importance of respecting cultural values for inmates and teaching others about Indigenous ways. In reflection, it seems my writing practice at the kitchen table had a contagious positive impact on my family. I was stretching the boundaries of my identity as a mom in the traditional form of caretaker, to a mom as a form of educator. The symbolic identities of the two faces of being a mom were socially constructed at the kitchen table, another irony on traditional female roles, yet I don’t cook (Francis & Adams, 2019, Serpe & Striker, 2011). Education was at the heart of my gift to my family, a form of sustenance nourishing the soul. That table is gone now, replaced by another one after I graduated, and it makes me sad, at times, as I realize how many memories we created at that table. Just a bench and a piece of wood socially constructed to be the heart of our family.

**Reflection 6: I am Blessed**

When I reflect on this topic, my number one concern is “have I missed out on any precious moments with my son.” Mostly, I notice myself trying to juggle my attention. I want to be attentive and present for my son, and I want him to know the security of a loving and securely attached mother. I want to be responsive to his needs and listening for the moments when he needs care. I don’t want to miss these opportunities. That said, I find myself routinely deep in thought or deeply engaged in my work. When he calls to me, in these moments, I am usually at least 1 – 2 sentences behind in his storytelling. I have missed the beginning and need to ask questions to clarify. I don’t hear the whole story and I don’t hear his whole ask, so force him to repeat himself. I reflect on this and wonder how this will affect his future relationships. My son and I have what I would categorize as a breathtakingly beautiful relationship, I am blessed beyond words.

I often think about when I started my PhD. Jack would have been 8 at the time, soon to turn 9. He is a patient and independent child, for this I could not be more grateful. He did his homework when he got home without my asking. He read when he felt like reading, played video games with his friends for a healthy amount of time without being told to do something else, he watched educational television to keep his mind busy, and played guitar without being pushed to practice his lessons. I drove him to his sporting events and cooked him his meals, and if he had been allowed to drive or use a stove, I am sure he would have done those independently without question. He is now 15 and beyond all of those previously mentioned things, he is now what I would classify as a “darn” great cook. Phew, he did not need me for these things. I still missed out. We plan our time together into our schedules. We have our routines, and we commit chunks of time to go to mini putt, the movie theatre, watch tv together, play cards, play board games, go hiking, go paddling… (pre-COVID-19 times for some of these). But we schedule our time. Neither of us has the propensity toward spontaneity, but with my schedule, we have to plan our time together. There are many weekends where I have to forewarn him that I have a few deadlines, so there aren’t many chunks of time this weekend where I won’t be at my computer. He understands and he accepts. I am blessed that he is tolerant and these times do not become moments of conflict. I am blessed.

I am deeply appreciative as well for all of the opportunities to share in conversations with my son about my work. My first year PhD program during the coursework period Jack and I were in a Star Wars phase, rewatching all of the old and new Star Wars. Did we not have some amazing dialogue around the Darth Vader character and the identity crises he experienced in both the old and new trilogy. When he was doing a metal music and the Vietnam war research assignment for schoolwork, we had a blast listening to our favourite music and doing lyrical analyses. Doing a PhD and having a child is glorious at times…watching him feed off my excitement and intellectualizing our favourite music and films. I get to be excited with him when he is loving his Biology classes and getting a 100% on his final exam. He makes motherhood easy. He is the light in my every day.

I think back sometimes and I know so many of my cohort members and other cohort members had more than one child or they had younger children….I think on their journeys and I wonder, I hope they are not struggling. I know that when my son was born, I was not able to let him out of my sight for fear something would happen to him. I would not have been able to start a PhD while Jack was between the ages of 0 – 6. I could not be separated from him long enough to focus my attention on studies. I hope other PhD mothers were not struggling.

**Reflection 7: A ‘Big Boy’ Breaking All the Rules**

About this time last year, I was startled by *the* question. I had not given it much thought; sure, I had rehearsed my response, but I was not ready to admit it to myself or allow others to hear. A part of my academic naivety vanished that day as I heard those six words: ‘*When will you finish your PhD?*’ The answer to this question represented more than just an innocent pondering of a well-intentioned colleague who meant no harm in asking. After all, I occupy a few spaces of identity – man, husband, father, co-parent, and doctoral student – that do not wholly define but each play a part of who I am. Caught off guard in a weak moment, I was defenseless; replying with an idealistic goal of “*just one more year*.” What blasphemy! Another year? It had already been four years since I began my program (unlike the expected questions of childbearing and biological clocks that my female contemporaries have had to face). No, this was not my reply but a stream of consciousness that I am reminded of each time I have picked up my dissertation since. I should have known that these are ‘the rules’ (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991) of completing a PhD – spending four years being nurtured as a student in an accredited Canadian school before being pushed to spread my wings and fly on my own – but I did not want to play by them. In fact, I broke all kinds of rules along the way.

I began my PhD in the spring of 2016, mere months after graduating from accelerating my own graduate studies in an MBA program. I am guilty of breaking two rules here: (1) ‘Going rogue’ and owning the competition of my master’s degree, and (2) Resisting the pressure to ‘return to the classroom’ only after building years of ‘practical’ work experience. Sure, these may only be minor, but they shaped the course I set for myself. That fall, I took part-time teaching contracts to supplement a modest fellowship so that I could study ‘full-time’ (which really meant full-time-plus-more’). Another rule: (3) Dare to divide my time between research and teaching, especially more than one class and before comprehensive exams. Indeed, I had become so accustomed to bending ‘the rules’ placed on a doctoral student that I had not recognized the err of my ways when my wife and I decided to start our family before the security of an awarded doctorate and tenure-track position.

Our son, Luke, was born in December 2018, six months after completing my comprehensive exams. In my new role as a father and co-parent, in addition to my subject-position of doctoral student, I had trampled over the biggest rule of all: (4) Parent at your own risk and to the demise of an academic career. Indeed, these new roles did prompt me to draw on a variety of cues from my changing environment: Maternity leave, family budget, contract work, and program time-to-completion. In Karl Weick’s (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*, these moments of change (he terms them as a ‘shock’) cause individuals to ask questions like “*who am I?*” Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010) lets us know that the way an individual reconciles their response to this line of questioning will impact their understanding of their own identities in situ. For me, the identity of a “good doctoral student” is seemingly at odds with “present father,” each being constructed by rules about how a doctoral-student-as-parent should function within the academy.

I learned that there is a space for me to be me – I am both student and co-parent at the same time. What I had realized in breaking rules is that I am free to own my experience as mine. Is owning my identity of doctoral-student-as-parent difficult? Yes. Am I finished my dissertation? No. Would I like to be? Of course. What I have learned in the year that has followed in the aftermath of ‘*the* question’ is that sometimes the journey matters more than the destination. For now, I am content with who and where I am, not defined by a schedule or plan-to-completion.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In our reflections, we discussed an array of different emotions and experiences. We disclosed details perhaps unknown to even our close circles. It’s hard to unveil truth(s) in academia, especially as it relates to our PhD experience because we are people who are supposed to have it all together. We are supposed to have all the answers. We ‘elected’ to be in our positions, and so any form of anxiety or stress is considered self-induced, and only a product of our doing. We acknowledge our many privileges, yet also acknowledge that the PhD journey along with caregiving and mothering is not an easy process. It remains an individual enterprise of balancing, managing, bearing responsibility, and mitigating risks. In these fragmented, individual, and embodied stories, we wanted to shed light on a variety of diverse experiences to perhaps contest institutional hegemony (Prasad, 2016) – to deconstruct the norms we’ve been so accustomed to. Could there be an easier way? Could we, by raising our subjective feminist consciousness, make room for an alternative? Could we, by collectively resisting the dualities between mind and body, possibly make room for different ways of organizing – for ways that blend these two facets? Could we envision a reality where our identities as mothers/caregivers and PhD students were not held in such antagonistic positions? In our *we*ness (Ahonen et al., 2020), there are valuable lessons we can learn and continue to strive towards.

In our reflections, we learned of how identities of mother and PhD student were discussed under a neoliberal framework of profit-loss. We understood how new motherhood (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019) could complicate the PhD experience and result in a struggle between self-aspirations and mothering. We also saw the consequences of our PhD studies on not only our mental health but also on our physical bodies – how stress can manifest in different ways due to gruelling schedules, deadlines, and expectations – expectations both prescribed by our institutions and those self-imposed. We also learned how our own histories and past experiences instruct what kind of PhD experience we want to create in our own households – a PhD experience that is isolating and lonely or one based on relationships and care. We learn from our past of ways of unlearning privilege (Spivak, 1988). We learn from our past of practices that we would like to dismantle. We learn from our past that we do not want history to repeat itself. Yet, we see things from our different lenses now and smile at the irony of life, and somehow feel a bit less judgemental towards the past, because we understand the power of the capitalist neoliberal system. We understand now that it sometimes doesn’t give you a choice – that you need to play the game to stay in it.

More poignantly, we recognize that our PhD experiences are also shaped by our own intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991). PhD experiences vary based on race, gender, mother’s age, child’s age, and immigrant status. This was expressed beautifully in reflection 4. Experiences of doctoral students and motherhood, generally focus on mothers with infants and young children (e.g, Huopalainen & Satama, 2019). What about the mothers who do not fall under that category yet need to continue to play a pivotal role in their young adult children’s lives due to their race and black bodies? Bodies who are not the norm and remain in a system that is not so kind and compassionate towards the Other (Said, 1978). A mother’s protective stance is still necessitated, yet studies on PhD experiences rarely investigate those intersections. And so, a lack of representation of black women academics is compounded by a silencing of black women’s experiences at the doctoral level. There are just far too many omissions we need to continue to push back against.

We also learned how material spaces are socially constructed (Francis & Adams, 2019, Serpe & Striker, 2011), and how the kitchen table, for example, could become a place that blended between the academic self and family life. The deliberate action of writing the thesis at the kitchen table was perhaps a form of resistance to the isolating ways in which academics usually work. It was a process of being included in the conversations that were happening daily. It was about being a present mom without the fear of missing out. Moreover, we learned of other ways of bonding with our children and including them in the ‘contract’ of our PhD experience. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, we bring them along in the process with us. When we sign our acceptance letters into the PhD program, we rarely include our children’s signatures, but they remain a vital aspect of the journey. Acknowledging that ‘psychological contract’ (Rousseau, 2003) with our children is an important starting point – that it isn’t just about us, it’s also about them.

Finally, we also understood that including a father’s voice in our repertoire of stories on motherhood, was an essential addition to our conversation. Aren’t we all impacted by the same system and *rules* that put pressure on PhD students to write, finish quickly, and publish well? We are. We know that the identities of being a good academic/doctoral student are also at odds with being a present father. Does the system affect us in the same way? As shown from our diverse stories, it does not. And so, we need to keep peeling back at the assumption that we are all the same products of the same system and continue to allow our reflection points to make those disparities clear. We also need to acknowledge that we do not operate in silos and need to find ways of building lines of communication with each other. So, we can hopefully build institutions that prioritize care, mothering, and fathering, while also being able to hold other social categories, such as PhD student, and not find the two so incommensurable.

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1. Although we predominantly reflect on issues of motherhood, the only male author, brings an interesting perspective to the piece. As a new father, his views on fatherhood/motherhood are pertinent to understanding changing gendered norms and expectations. He also understands the collective responsibility of men in helping the feminist project for gender egalitarianism (see Prasad et al., 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)