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Academic Motherhood and COVID-19

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Problematic Intersections: Dance, Motherhood, and the Pandemic

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

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

Background and Context

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

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

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

Shared Concerns in the Academic and Artistic Communities

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hustle Culture and Expectations in the Dance Sector

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

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

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

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

Patriarchy and Colonialism in Dance

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

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

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

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

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

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

Historically Hierarchical Training and a Focus on Youth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mother-Artists Are Not at the Creative Table

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A History of Not Being at the Table in Academic Dance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Supporting Mothers in Dance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Normalizing the Presence of Children in Our Work

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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