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

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

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

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

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

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Any Afternoon, April 2020

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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I am so angry. So deeply sad.

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Afternoon, in the Time of the Virus

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

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

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

I have written three paragraphs on this essay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I want the dean out of my kitchen.

*

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

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

*

June

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Evening, Late Summer, in the Time of the Virus

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

*

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

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Morning, late July, in the Time of the Coronavirus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Morning, August 3—

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

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

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

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

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

Endnotes

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

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