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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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