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The New Normal? Work, Family, and Higher Education under COVID-19

Accounts of the social and economic changes brought on by COVID-19 describe these changes as the “new normal.” I argue that these changes are actually an extension of existing trends. For five decades, neoliberal reforms have resulted in the privatization and corporatization of everyday life, reshaping social institutions in the process. Of these institutions, the contemporary university is particularly important because it is both a workplace and a training ground in which neoliberal norms around competition, achievement, and individualism are enforced and promoted. This situation has socialized a new class of professionals to be productive workers who expect very little from their government, which is particularly problematic for women attempting to balance work and family life. To explore what this means under pandemic conditions, I draw on the life of Angelica, a woman who traded a life of drug addiction and welfare dependency for college attainment and professional work. College should have liberated her; instead, it has left her with a demanding job and little to no institutional help. I compare what is expected of Angelica as a college-educated working mother under the pandemic and what was expected of me as a professor and mother before the pandemic, suggesting important continuities in the pace of work, the nature of care, and the expectations of the self and others.

A Reintroduction

When the pandemic hit, Stockton, California, was still reinventing itself. The 2008 global recession had left the city decimated; entire neighborhoods emptied of families as bank-owned houses lay vacant. Of course, the City of Stockton did not have too far to fall. It had long been home to low-income racial-ethnic “others” who laboured on Central Valley farmland or in the San

Francisco Bay area. In the 1990s, the city became “majority minority,” with whites fleeing to exurbs as Stockton’s complexion grew darker (Mannon, “Faces of Stockton” 68). But the recession left Stockton particularly bruised, with Forbes magazine crowning it America’s Most Miserable City in 2011. In the years that followed, it looked like the city might turn the corner on this crisis. A young Black mayor with roots in the city and a Stanford education was elected on a promise to transform the city. He attracted national attention for initiatives around implementing a universal basic income, reducing gun violence, and facilitating college attendance.

In the heady days of this urban reinvention, I came to see Stockton as something of a natural laboratory. Not only did the city have its fair share of problems, but it had within its borders at least one potential solution: a four-year university degree program that offered a potential pathway out of poverty. University of the Pacific was the first private university in the Central Valley and today ranks among the state’s most reputable private universities. Its ivory tower peeks up from a canopy of trees as if to beckon students from the bowels of the city with its promise of high-earning jobs and improved life chances. But was college really a panacea? To study this question, I began following one Stocktonian as she navigated college and attempted to translate her degree into a good job, a woman I call Angelica. Angelica and I had met when we both started at Pacific—she a first-year transfer student and me a new tenure-track professor. Neither of us was typical. Angelica was a single mother on welfare. I was a once tenured professor who had fallen in academic rank after having a baby. For both of us, Pacific was a second chance and our best shot at securing solid middle-class footing. If Pacific was going to offer anything to Stockton, I reasoned, I had to see first if it offered anything to us.

In 2018, I published an analysis of Angelica’s path through Pacific (Mannon, “Misery”). As I suggested then, there was never any guarantee that Angelica would make it to graduation. When she started at Pacific, she was pregnant with her third child and had just been abandoned by her partner. The university neither cared about these challenges nor accommodated them. And the state was not much better. She had to fight with case workers to even attend college. Despite these odds, she finished her degree and found a job, though not a high paying one, as a resident services coordinator at a low-income housing complex. She had also settled into married life, though it, too, had its downsides, since her husband was a long-term inmate in a California prison. Her welfare benefits expired and still no partner with whom to share expenses, Angelica struggled to raise children and her standard of living even with a college degree. I concluded that what college offered people like Angelica was complicated, even more so when I considered what the academy offered me. Because while Angelica struggled to get through college and get something out of it, I was struggling to find within the academy any semblance of financial

security and work-family balance. Even after earning a doctorate, I had spent half my career working as an adjunct professor, barely earning enough to pay for childcare.

By the time the pandemic hit, then, Angelica and I were much like the City of Stockton—testaments to American reinvention but also American precarity. As COVID-19 cases began to mount, schools closed their doors, the economy grounded to a halt, and all of us found ourselves in a familiar place: just struggling to get by. Thus, it was curious to hear talk about a “new normal.” Commentators lamented the burden now faced by parents, as their work life deteriorated or simply disappeared, their obligations to work and family competing as they sheltered in place. The government, which was barely attempting to contain the novel virus, had little help to offer. But was this really a new normal or just the old normal to which we were growing accustomed and perhaps even numb? As I continued to follow Angelica’s life and reflect on my own, I stopped asking whether Angelica was transformed by college because it was clear by then that she had been. Instead, I began asking what she was transformed into. Because I suspect that what Pacific gave her, and what Pacific gave me, was not so much the rewards of a middle-class life but the idea that work and not help would save us. In this sense, COVID-19 was no rupture, no turning point, and no new normal. It was the realization and unveiling of what we had been reduced to all along. The facade gone, we could see what an American city, a tenured professor, and a welfare mother turned college graduate had become: competitors in a high-stakes game that all of us were scared to lose.

Zooming in on a Life

In the San Francisco Bay Area, most people cannot afford to live where they work. Instead, they buy or rent homes along a corridor of dusty towns stretching north to south along California’s Central Valley. Stockton sits on this corridor and is connected by highway to both the state capital of Sacramento and San Francisco. This highway system and the commuter pattern it supported would be the same conduit for COVID-19 to spread rapidly throughout the region. By the time the pandemic is in full swing, however, all but the most essential of the area’s workers are shuttered in their homes. So, Angelica and I communicate mostly by phone or through Zoom. This is how she ends up giving me a video tour of her new home one day. “Here’s Lola’s room,” she explains, panning the camera to reveal the lavender-painted room of her twelve-year-old daughter. Moisés, her son, jumps in and out of view, grinning widely, as he holds up an angry-looking, long-haired cat.

Angelica exits through a door to reveal a sprawling backyard, where her brother stands over an electric saw, a pencil tucked neatly behind his ears.

Earlier, she had complained about him: “He bitches about how I’m not raising Moisés right and disciplines him. But when it’s time to help Moisés with school—get him online—my brother’s asleep in his room!” Now, her brother glances at her, turning back to the saw without speaking. Angelica walks around the yard’s perimeter, the lawn littered with furniture and boxes. “We’ve got cockroaches. So, we had to put everything out here to clean and spray the house,” she explains. The cockroaches have been an ongoing issue, and their things have been out on the lawn for some time. Angelica shows off a makeshift greenhouse, where she is growing succulents to sell on the side; she then returns to the house to settle into the couch, one of the few remaining pieces of furniture in the living room.

“How are you feeling these days?” I ask. Angelica is still recuperating from COVID-19, which she caught at work. It somehow seemed fitting that Angelica, who was always coping with crises, would turn up positive, especially since she had many of the risk factors associated with the disease: a job as an essential worker, membership in a multigenerational household, and residence in one of the hardest hit areas in the country. “My family was furious with me,” she remembers. “It took eight days for the results to come back, and we had my grandma and all my aunts and uncles over. I kissed my grandma on the cheek and everything.” But no one else’s test results came back positive, and their anger soon turned to suspicion. “They started talking shit like, ‘You didn’t really have it. It was a false positive,’” she recounts. “I was in bed for like a week. It really hurt that they didn’t even think I had it, especially ‘cause I was the one working to support everyone.”

Angelica had always been something of a black sheep in her family. In her late teens and early twenties, she had been a drug addict, a high school dropout, and a single mother. As such, they questioned and scrutinized everything she did—from going to college, to having another baby, to getting married. Everything seemed unreasonable and reckless to them. Why get a bachelor’s degree when what she needed was a job? Why have a third baby when she was single and already had two children? Why get married when the man she was marrying was Black, Muslim, and in prison? In the eyes of her family, Angelica was a train wreck, even after she got sober, earned her GED, and won a scholarship to attend college. In the eyes of society, Angelica looked even worse. She was a woman of colour, a once undocumented immigrant, and a former welfare dependent. Her addiction to drugs had cost her custody of her first born and would have cost her custody of her second born had she not entered rehab and gotten clean. In these respects, she bore the markers of feminized poverty, urban decay, and social disorder. Thus, she and I were constantly rewriting her narrative to cast her as something more than the bad mother and social deviant that everyone saw her as. “I’m sorry they didn’t believe you,” I say, always struggling to find the right words to comfort her.

“You deserve better.” And she does.

The Business of Higher Education

Along Angelica’s path to redemption, college attainment played a pivotal role. It signalled conformity and legitimacy, and it marked a before and an after in her life history. Yet just as higher education was orchestrating a transformation of Angelica, it was experiencing a transformation of its own. Scholars disagree on exactly when this transformation began, but they agree that it involved a shift in a more businesslike direction. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades use the term “academic capitalism” to describe the shift. Others have described it as “knowledge capitalism” (Olssen and Peters) and the “corporate university” (Tuchman). Whatever the case, and whatever the term, the new model entails a detour from the university’s earlier purpose of promoting engaged citizenship and public knowledge. In place of or alongside these lofty goals, the modern university is now in the business of making money. The 1970s fiscal crisis of the state, which reduced public spending for universities, cemented this corporate direction.

Higher education’s newfound business mindedness coincided globally with a move towards smaller governments and freer markets. So-called neoliberal for its resuscitation of classic economic principles, this new market orientation came to pervade almost all aspects of life. Cash-strapped governments began outsourcing everything from garbage collection to mass imprisonment while time-starved families purchased cleaning services and family dinner from the market. To what extent has the market intruded into academia? Scholars have had no shortage of answers, in part because their work and intellectual life have been so negatively implicated (Aronowitz; Connell; Giroux; Olssen; Park; Saunders). They have highlighted the commodification of both knowledge and education in the form of grants and patents, student fees, and tuition dollars. They have also pointed to the privatization of higher education, evidenced by the reduction in state spending and the dramatic rise in for-profit colleges. Finally, they have lamented the corporatization of the academy, with university leaders morphing into managers and CEOs, faculty into service providers and sales representatives, and students into customers looking for a return on their investment (Slaughter and Rhoades).

These neoliberal trends have resulted in competitive pressures at every level of the university system. Universities compete for students and grants; departments and programs jockey for resources and majors; faculty vie for tenure-track lines and publications; and students battle for spots at elite and even middle-tier schools. Some win; others lose. And in this regard, the statistics are telling. A 2015 Moody’s Investor Service report predicted that the number of American colleges forced to close would likely triple in the

coming decade due to inadequate revenue. A 2018 analysis by the American Association of University Professors showed that over 70 per cent of faculty positions in the United States (U.S.) are now off the tenure track. And 2016 data showed that the average student loan debt in the U.S. stood at a whopping \$32,731 (Board of Directors). The irony, of course, is that the corporate university blossomed at precisely the same moment when higher education became so central to achieving social mobility (Attewell and Lavin; Hout).

How does this context help us understand the university under pandemic conditions? In March of 2020, when almost every U.S. college and university transitioned to remote instruction, university life retreated into the household. The online classroom became academia's frontline and faculty its essential workers. Instructors had to learn new online teaching modalities, develop new lines of communication, survey and connect students to technology and academic support, and, of course, do everything they did before the pandemic: teach students, advise majors, conduct research, and provide service. For those who had caregiving responsibilities, the situation was particularly dire. Because alongside their own classes, faculty had to assist their own bewildered children as they transitioned to online learning. Households became computer labs that challenged even the most well connected and technologically savvy.

At first glance, it seems that life had been turned upside down as a result of COVID-19. But as we consider the transformation overtaking academia over the past fifty years, it all seems oddly familiar. The university system had long attempted to externalize costs. Online course platforms, laptop computers, and email brought work home and into the weekend. For adjunct instructors, who are almost never provided office space, homes and even cars were already places of work. And due both to the imperative that faculty publish or perish and the underpaid nature of most faculty appointments, work life took on a frenetic pace as faculty tried to cram ever more into the work week. This intensification of work life has not been limited to academia. It has been a characteristic feature of almost every professional workplace setting in recent years. What makes higher education unique is that it is not only a workplace but a training ground. Here is not only where we work to stay on top but where we teach others to do the same. In my earlier analysis of Angelica's life, I argued that to best understand what college offered a woman like her, we had to examine what comes after college. Holding up my own life as an example, I suggested that although college offers employability, it does not necessarily offer quality of life or middle-class security. Now, I argue that the best way to understand what the coronavirus means to women like Angelica and what it means to me, we have to understand what came before the pandemic hit as much as what came after. Because what looks like a new normal is arguably the old normal, just a bit more intense.

Encountering the New Normal

In the last week of February, mere weeks before northern California would be forced into a lockdown, Angelica was promoted to the position of resident services manager, overseeing both her own and six other properties. In retrospect, the timing was fortuitous because within two months, Angelica would be financially supporting her entire household. Her position was considered essential. And from the sound of it, it was nothing but. A mobile food bank came to the property once a month, which it had always done. But under social distancing restrictions, Angelica had to individually bag food for the ninety-two units in her complex and take them to each apartment. Using massive spreadsheets, she also had to determine the myriad needs of her residents, everything from unemployment and food stamps to Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots. About half the residents in her complex lost their jobs. And since most did not know how to navigate the social welfare system, she had to do the paperwork for them. California's Employment Development Department, which processes unemployment claims, quickly became overwhelmed at the start of the pandemic. So, it was not merely a question of filling out an application: "We would go in first thing in the morning and call [to check on their applications] and couldn't even get through. And then it was a matter of figuring out the right things to say.... Like you had to be a fucking accountant." In April, an anonymous donor gave the nonprofit for whom Angelica worked two million dollars to help defray the costs of rent for people affected by the pandemic. The donation created a whole new layer of administrative tasks for Angelica: "It became a mess tracking it ... keeping up with who signed it and then looking at check stubs to find the dates and the amounts, the net and the gross.... It became so time consuming because if you can imagine forty-six applications. And every month there was a different round." Angelica was working sixty-hour weeks for months: "It was one of those things where you just go, go, go, because if you stop, you fall apart."

By this point, Angelica's three children had moved to remote instruction. With a daughter in high school, another in junior high and another in kindergarten, Angelica could barely keep up. Due to the pandemic, her mother had been forced to shut down the bar she owned and was available to supervise Angelica's children. But she did not prove to be much help:

She would be like, "Is Lola supposed to be on the computer because she's in bed." And I'm like, "Yeah, mom, she's supposed to [be on the computer]!" [Lola's] teachers kept emailing me "Lola's not doing her work." And so finally, at some point, I [said to the teachers]: "I don't know what your expectations are. But I am not able to help her. And my mom doesn't know how to help her. And her sister is helping herself."

Angelica's residents and her children were not the only ones in need of help. Her mother had a small business and had applied for a loan offered by the Small Business Administration. The Payment Protection Program was designed to help small businesses keep their business and their employees afloat. But almost no small, locally run businesses managed to get the loan. Angelica learned from her supervisor's wife that businesses had to apply for the loan through smaller banks. So, with Angelica's help, her mom applied a second time and managed to secure a loan. But the process was hardly easy:

[My mom's] personal and business finances were all meshed. So, I had to figure [out] how much money she spent on goods, how much her revenue was, how much she paid employees, how much she paid in payroll taxes.... I was researching when I was home or on the weekends ... and then during the week just working so I never, ever had time for the kids. You know, and they were just falling further and further behind. With Angelica's help, her mom was also able to get unemployment. But at two hundred dollars a week, it barely covered food and gas.

And then there was Angelica's husband, Talib. Talib and Angelica had met when she was working at a state prison. Her developing relationship with him had been grounds for her dismissal. As he was transferred to different prisons throughout the state, she faithfully called and visited. After some years, they married in a Muslim ceremony closely supervised by prison staff. They had been working for over a year with a lawyer to see if Talib qualified for early release under the prison reforms adopted by the state. In the meantime, she had to advocate for him constantly. For example, during the pandemic, Talib was relegated to his cell where, through an illicit trade in cell phones, he was able to talk to Angelica nightly. When the guards discovered the phone, they confiscated his Koran as punishment. Talib was furious and called Angelica:

"I need you to advocate for me and write emails and letters" [he said].... So, I called everybody that I could in the prison system—wardens and the ombudsman and the special investigations units. Three weeks after I started making phone calls, he got [his Koran] back.... It's like you basically have to be a lawyer because I had to cite this penal code [and show] that they cannot take away his religious things. Tellingly, Angelica described her phone calls with Talib as work, since he needed so much emotional support and institutional help.

Along with being a breadwinner for her family, a social worker for her residents, a teacher for her children, an accountant for her mother, and a lawyer for her husband, Angelica was a therapist for the people for whom she sympathized deeply:

A lot of times, I'd come home crying, you know, just like the emotional labour of dealing with everybody's situation.... People getting COVID and being scared and not being able to go out and get essentials.... Or a [seventy-year-old] grandma [who's] raising grandkids, and she has cancer, and, you know, parents are drug addicts running the streets, and she's stuck with a five- and six-year-old to raise.... Families that have eight or nine people and waiting for months on end for their unemployment to come. And a lot of people didn't have anybody to talk to. So, I became a counsellor, a therapist.

In short, Angelica was everything to everyone. But what is striking about her story is not how much she worked and cared for everyone but how little everyone worked and cared for her. Even when Angelica tested positive for the coronavirus, her family responded with a mixture of anger and suspicion. Angelica was in what she has described as a “hopeless place”; her only sanctuary were the moments she stole, parked in her car, before going to face another day of work.

Revisiting the Old Normal

Although life during the pandemic felt overwhelming for Angelica, it was not the first time she had struggled. And it likely would not be the last. Often, COVID-19 felt the same for me a—mere footnote in a life of tumult and frenzy. Unlike Angelica, my early years afforded middle-class privilege. I was native born, the child of white parents born and raised in the country's midwestern heartland. My father was a college professor, and although he and my mother divorced and my mother moved my sister and me, I had as orderly a home as a single, working mother could provide. My mother went on to have a successful career, demonstrating ambition in abundance, as she worked late each night over coffee and cigarettes. By the time I left home for college, I knew how to make good grades, how to write, and how to win. I quickly set my sights on graduate school, securing a scholarship to one of the top ranked doctoral programs in the country. My first job was at a Research I university, and I was under no illusions about what it would take to get tenure there. Immediately, I set to work launching research projects and publishing journal articles. Just as in graduate school, I worked fifty-hour weeks and did not date. So, it was out of character when, on a drunken night, I created a profile on Match.com. That's how I met Brett, who lived in a neighbouring state. Within three years, I would be married and pregnant.

I had not planned to get pregnant with Annie. Although I certainly wanted children, I had no idea how to make room for them in my life. I knew nothing about the family leave policy at my university, which was not surprising because it turned out that there was no policy. Brett and I continued to live in

two different states, each with household expenses of our own. Taking unpaid leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act was, therefore, out of the question. In any event, my department chair discouraged me from taking the leave, counselling me to simply take a couple weeks off to have the baby. Having never had a baby, this sounded reasonable. Annie arrived on February 17, and I lined up my parents to come and take turns caring for her. This was before their eyesight and patience deteriorated to the point where they could manage only periodic visits. I needed their help more than ever because not only did I have a newborn, I had just a few months before going up for tenure. Brett dropped in when he could, but he was busy interviewing for jobs in locations that could accommodate both our careers. And this is how we became a tired but troublesome statistic. Brett secured a higher paid position in California and I, following my tenure announcement, resigned to follow him. In an instant, his salary increased by \$15,000. Mine disappeared.

Cognizant that a gap in my employment record would ruin my chances of working at a university again, I took any adjunct appointment I could find, most of them online and out of state. Over the years that followed, I pieced together a contingent work life, teaching six courses a semester at four different universities. I had no health insurance, no retirement benefits, and, again, no family leave when my second daughter was born. In a good year, I earned \$45,000 year before taxes. After taxes, childcare expenses, and tucking some money away for retirement, I barely earned enough to pay my share of the mortgage. And it certainly did not feel like I was living a middle-class life. We eked by with a weekly food budget of \$125, picking up half our groceries at the Dollar Tree.

After five years as an adjunct, the unthinkable happened: a tenure-track position came open in my field at University of the Pacific. In addition to teaching courses and raising children, I had continued to publish, which helped me land a job at the rank of associate professor with two years to secure tenure. It was arguably harder to earn tenure the second time, especially after Belle, my two-year old, ended up in the hospital and diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. I struggled to make room for six insulin injections a day, training the staff at her daycare to care for her and track her blood sugar. Eventually, I did earn tenure. But by then, I had bigger problems. Although Brett and I had always planned for three children, I was now over forty and had already endured two miscarriages. After Belle's birth and diagnosis, I would endure four more. It felt as if I had been walking up hill for years to achieve what had come so easily to my own parents. I had done the hard work, played the game well, and made the right investments. And yet here I was, panting like a marathon runner with three more miles to go. When Annie, my eldest daughter, was also diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, I felt defeated. With no after school program willing or legally required to accommodate her disease,

Brett and I hired a nanny for \$20 an hour, which pushed our monthly childcare expenses to over \$1300 a month. Around the same time, the university announced its first of many salary freezes. After sixteen years of working as a college professor, my salary had risen a mere \$5,000. But I was lucky. Brett and I had health insurance, which was no small matter since our daughters' disease cost well over \$2000 a month to manage.

Having struggled and failed to bring a pregnancy to term, my husband and I decided to pursue in vitro fertilization using a donor embryo at a cost of \$21,000. After taking out a second mortgage, and already being in horrendous debt, the cost seemed manageable. I gave birth to Izzy at the age of forty-five, exactly four months after becoming department chair and learning that we could not afford for me to take maternity leave. For three weeks following Izzy's birth, I strapped him to my chest and taught my courses until the semester ended. Summer offered a respite, and I was thankful because when the fall semester started, I was scrambling for daycare. Izzy had been waitlisted at the one childcare centre in town. As we desperately waited for a spot to open, I pieced together babysitters so that I could teach and run the department. In between meetings and classes, I shuffled Izzy between babysitters, rushing into my classes drenched in sweat and leaking milk. My students were never afraid to ask for accommodation for a litany of learning disabilities I had never heard of, but they were not inclined to extend much compassion towards me. They skewered me in their evaluations of my teaching. So, it was with great celebration when, in January of 2020, a spot opened up at the daycare. Izzy started full time the final week of January. Six weeks later, the pandemic hit.

The Problem of Higher Education

What can we learn from the histories and experiences of two very different women whose lives once intersected in the university? Do they tell us something about work and family life in the time of COVID-19 or reveal something about the function, or dysfunction, of the modern university? The differences between Angelica's work-family experiences after the pandemic hit and my experiences before are both numerous and significant. But considering these stories together is suggestive. As COVID-19 cases raged across California, Angelica worked tirelessly and inched ever closer to burnout as she alone cared for over a hundred people. This is no surprise; it is what we would expect. What may come as a surprise is that a woman with plenty more racial and class privileges, more education than 98 per cent of the country, and a partner with whom to share expenses and responsibilities would find herself in a similar state long before the pandemic even hit. If I was barely holding on before the coronavirus, why should we expect a Mexican immigrant woman who is raising three children in America's "most miserable city" to be anything

but hopeless in the middle of this pandemic? I was the best case in the old normal, and she the worst case in the new normal. And our lives were equally frenzied, disempowering, and, above all, exhausting.

One could simply argue that Angelica's life and my own look similar because we are working mothers. But is there another variable at work here? For years, I have reflected on the role that higher education plays in the new economy, theorizing that it both reflects neoliberalism in its emerging corporate structure and facilitates neoliberalism in its training of a professional workforce. In my earlier analysis of Angelica's life, I suggested that Angelica gained meaning from college not simply because it gave her a credential to navigate a competitive labour market but because it placed her symbolically on the right side of society once she graduated. It wiped clean the smudge of her undocumented status, drug addiction, single motherhood, and welfare dependency. But Angelica was not simply recast as a respectable member of society; she was transformed by higher education. College inculcated in her all the hallmarks of neoliberalism: personal responsibility, individual achievement, work productivity, and competitive drive. In short, it instilled in her the self-discipline necessary to compete in the market. Angela Duckworth would call this "grit;" I would call it self-torture. In the hidden curriculum of the neoliberal university, we learn to internalize the notion that to ask for help or depend on others is to be a loser. And when we fail, which we inevitably do, we learn to blame ourselves. College does not teach us to question or seek truth. It teaches us to be individuals. It teaches us to compete. And it teaches us to win, or at least to fear losing.

Thus, when COVID-19 hit, we had already been broken in. We knew how to work late, denying our bodies rest and nourishment. We were accustomed to America's inadequate human service infrastructure, which gave help begrudgingly and in miniscule portion. And here is where neoliberalism takes on its intensely gendered character because the submission to the market that neoliberalism demands of workers echoes the historic submission expected of women. The two forms of servitude are, in fact, related since women's unpaid care work has always undergirded capitalism. The coronavirus pandemic entailed almost a complete privatization of everyday life, most notably in the abdication by the state to care for the sick or educate the country's children in any meaningful way. Suddenly, we glimpsed what a truly neoliberal world would look like. With no state to offer school reopening plans, a reliable COVID-19 test, or even toilet paper when stores ran out, we found whatever market alternatives we could, neglecting our wellbeing and our children's wellbeing when we could not.

Without question, Angelica and I were better off on account of our university education when compared to the residents in her housing complex. To begin, we both have remained employed throughout the pandemic. But one of the

most troubling transformations that takes place under neoliberalism is that we begin to feel lucky for even the tiniest bit of fortune. Instead of asking why one of the richest countries in the world cannot ensure that everyone's basic needs are met, we keep our mouths shut, lest we look ungrateful that we have so much while others do not. In the end, Angelica and I are competitors in a race we never designed. And though we are winning, we are clearly out of breath.

Stepping Back from a Life

When the pandemic hits, Izzy's daycare remains open. It is one of the few businesses that does. But on a hot day in September, Izzy has been banned from the centre due to a fever of 101. It turns out not to be COVID-19, but a case of hand-foot-and-mouth disease. He stumbles around the house in a loose-fitting onesie, with his growing blond hair dishevelled and his mouth covered in angry red blisters. Although he regularly naps a full three hours at daycare, he has never slept more than thirty minutes at home. So, by 1:00 p.m., he is wide awake but cranky. When I begin class on Zoom, he crumples to the floor by my chair crying loudly. One advantage to a virtual classroom is that students cannot see anything beyond the camera, and I gather him on my lap and pull out a tired breast to put in his mouth.

When California had gone on lockdown, and our household had begun working from home, we all set up workspaces in the house, staking out claims like greedy miners. I had claimed the dining room table, settling into the main room of the house, an open-concept dining, living, and kitchen area. It proves a disastrous choice, since my concentration evaporates the minute anyone goes into the kitchen for food or the living room for respite. "Mom, how long should I microwave the popcorn?" "Mom, wanna see what I made on Minecraft?" "Mom, what's nine plus three?" Regularly, I scream at my children to shut up, often forgetting to mute myself when I am in a meeting over Zoom. But a bigger problem than my concentration is my time, or lack thereof. My work and family life have not just collapsed into each other; my responsibilities to both have suddenly increased. Belle is in third grade and struggles with math. Annie is in seventh and disappears during class regularly to play outdoors. In between classes, I alternate between tutoring Belle and searching for Annie. But, like Angelica, most of the time, I am buried in my paid work, which piles up on my makeshift desk in an unstable stack.

That my paid work tasks should pile up is not surprising. As the chair of my department, I have to supervise faculty as they learn new online learning platforms; hunt down students who, like Annie, vanish regularly in remote instruction; and counsel everyone for whom this mode of learning proves overwhelming. I must devise strategies to attract and retain students, as the university frets over a precipitous decline in enrollment. My life becomes a

blur of virtual open houses, Zoom-based advising sessions, and Facebook Live events. In the middle of this frenzy, Pacific made two important announcements that affect me daily. First, in the interests of financial solvency, the university added one class to everyone's teaching load. Second, they stopped contributions to our retirement. Both had been proposals the administration had been pushing for years. And dumbstruck faculty voice their suspicions via lengthy email exchanges that this is a classic case of "shock doctrine," wherein neoliberal institutions exploit crises to push through policies that people are too distracted to resist (Klein).

The university's decision to increase our workload and reduce our pay while I am redesigning my classes and homeschooling my children weighs on me as I wrap up a lecture and dislodge Izzy from my breast. But I hardly have time to dwell. It is time to collect Belle from FunCamp. That's what they call it anyway. FunCamp is a gymnastics centre in town that has repackaged itself as a "virtual learning support center" at a cost of \$125 a week. Amid balance beams and floor mats, a group of fourteen elementary school students gather each day to learn from a distance behind three-sided cardboard panels. It looks like a cross between a gymnastics meet and a science fair. But it provides a space to move at least one of my children off site for the school day. As I strap Izzy into his car seat, I run through a mental to do list: pick up Belle, get gas, go to the pharmacy, make dinner, put Izzy to bed, and grade papers. A week earlier, I had run out of my antidepressants before I was allowed a refill. This was no surprise, since I had been doubling up for weeks to quell my growing anxiety. I had resorted to pilfering the pills from Annie, who had recently been placed on the same drug. Now, we are both out of pills, and it is finally time for a refill.

When I pull into the Kaiser parking lot, Izzy and Belle in tow, I realize that I have no way to get in the door. Izzy is still running a fever and will not make it past the temperature check. I park under a tree in a spot close to the door. "I'll be quick," I say to Belle. "If your brother cries, jump in the backseat and talk to him." I run into Kaiser, sighing with relief when I see no line. I am in and out within minutes. But as I make my way through the automatic doors, the heat of late summer enveloping me, my heart sinks. There, standing by Belle's window is a security guard on the phone. I run to the car stammering, "I'm her mom. She's ok. I just went in for a second to pick up my prescription." "Ma'am, I'm going to have to call the police. You're not allowed to leave children alone in the car," the guard declares. "I know I can't leave them in the car. But... But what was I supposed to do? The baby has a fever and I don't have anyone to watch him," I explain, my voice dripping with desperation. "Yes, this is Marta Gonzalez with Kaiser security, I'm calling to report two children left alone in a car," she says into the phone. I unlock the car to find Belle in the passenger's seat crying. "It's ok," I say as I put the key in the

ignition and back up with haste. “They’re gonna arrest you,” she shrieks. “They’re not gonna fucking touch me,” I say, my voice shaking as I speed out of the parking lot.

As we get on the highway, Belle’s tears begin to subside. “I was just so scared, and she kept asking me what your name was. And I didn’t say anything ‘cause I was scared you’d go to jail,” she says between gentle hiccups. “I’m so sorry I put you in that situation, Belle. But we’re ok. Let me take you to McDonald’s, ok? Let me get you some Chicken McNuggets,” I ramble. This cheers her up immediately, and within minutes, we are in the drive-thru ordering a four-piece chicken nugget. At the window, I grab my phone case to retrieve my debit card, realizing then that I only brought my insurance card. I don’t even have my driver’s license. “Belle, look in the glove compartment for change,” I command. Inside, she finds two one-dollar bills. A miracle. “See? Our day is turning around,” I say with a smile. The drive-thru window flings open, and a young man with a headset pokes his head out. “\$3.96 please.” “\$3.96?” I ask incredulously. “For four chicken nuggets?” Tears well up in my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I stammer. “I don’t have enough money.” “It’s ok,” he says kindly. “You can just pull through,” which gives me the impression that this has happened before. But the tears and the shame come anyway. And once I start crying, I cannot stop. A dam has broken inside me and all the pain, shame, and fatigue from twenty-eight years of university work, twelve years of mothering, and six months of pandemic hell come out in deep, heaving sobs that shake the car. They say it takes a village to raise a child. But I am alone, save for an infant sleeping behind me and an eight-year-old girl now stroking my arm. “It’s ok, mommy. Sometimes we just need a good cry.”

Another Conclusion

First, they dismantled welfare, imposing time limits and work requirements on poor single mothers. Then, they chipped away at funding for public schools, piling up children in classrooms and raising tuition by the thousands. Now, they are after social security, imagining new ways to run dry the shallow well of our social safety net. These efforts, begun long before COVID-19, were neither random nor disconnected. They were part of a trend, perhaps a plan to privatize and marketize each aspect of our lives. COVID-19 furthered these trends and carried them to fruition. There was no conspiracy, no committee unleashing the virus in order to move forwards a neoliberal agenda. There was only an opportunity to enact a grand dress rehearsal of what a world without social support would look like. Thus, there was no political miscalculation in President Donald Trump’s reaction to the pandemic. He reacted to the virus in the way a good neoliberal president should—by leaving individuals, families, and communities to figure it out on their own.

I once argued that there was no special magic that happened in college, no metamorphosis that made you stable and sane, which was why my life looked remarkably similar to Angelica's when we first met. I was wrong. College did transform Angelica; it just did not liberate her. It took a woman once addicted to drugs—half-heartedly raising her children and dependent on the state—and like the welfare system itself, it made her into an upstanding neoliberal citizen. Instead of being disciplined by the state, she learned to discipline herself, adapting to the rigours of near constant work and raising her children without help from the state or even their father. The corporate culture of college indoctrinated her into this habitus. For this, she was considered a winner, even though she arguably lost so much. As her former college professor and mentor, I was instrumental in this process, since I helped groom Angelica, just like my mother groomed me. As Angelica told me, "I've never been this responsible for so many people in my life. This is Angelica on a whole new level." She continued:

Initially, it felt really good that I was able to provide ... all the services to my residents. And that I was able to get my mom the loan and her unemployment going. You know, that I had the knowledge and the skills [to do that]. But then it kind of slipped into a burden. Like I'm holding up all of this and I can't fall apart because if I fall apart, it's all going to come tumbling down. Such was life under COVID-19; such was life under neoliberalism. For both, women's labor is crucial.

In her study of women factory workers in modern China, Pun Ngai argues that women's bodies naturally resist industrial time and discipline, even when the women do not consciously protest. Their night terrors, menstrual cycles, and pregnancies disrupt the production line, in a sense rebelling on women's behalf. I am not sure I agree. Women's bodies have shown tremendous capacity to withstand near constant labour, even when they are eight months pregnant or in the throes of a miscarriage. For this reason, Angelica and I, along with the world's labouring women, may be capitalism's most perfect servants, giving of ourselves willingly until there is nothing left. For resistance, you need fire and you need oxygen. Unable to breathe, we have neither, surviving instead off the fuel of antidepressants and coffee. Do we have any embers left in us? Perhaps. But only if we can catch our breath.

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