

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

# Learning from the Pandemic

## Possibilities and Challenges for Mothers and Families

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## **Art Looking within MotherScholarhood: Art Elicitation for Self-Reflections and Sense Making**

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*This study continues the ongoing collaborative autoethnographic, arts-based scholarship of three MotherScholars (Burrow et al.). This study presents both the critical self-reflections resulting from and advocacy for the process of art elicitation (Burrow and Burrow), which is a valid and effective methodology to allow MotherScholars a vital pause for valuable personal self-interrogation and renewed clarity within their scholarship. Like our previous research, this study reaffirms that MotherScholars need space and time to reflect on the fluidity and flexibility of their personal-professional identity as it is affected by natural life changes (e.g., children leaving home for college), unexpected transitions (e.g., divorce), and trauma (e.g., global pandemics). The necessity to find malleability in the MotherScholar identity can help women in academia name what they need and recognize what they are already uniquely suited to handle.*

### **Purpose**

This study adds to the long-term collaborative autoethnographic scholarship of three women in higher education (i.e., the coauthors), which documents the complicated personal-professional realities we navigate resulting from our shared identities as MotherScholars (Burrow et al.). Our collective scholarship, which primarily utilizes visual arts and other narrative methods to investigate MotherScholarhood, has endured throughout the creation and implementation of a nonfamily-friendly children in the workplace policy at our institute of higher education (tragically referred to by most staff and faculty as “the kid-ban policy”), the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, and the natural growing pains of mothering children who just continue to grow up. This study

is a return to our initial arts-based research (Burrow et al.), as we seek to identify our current MotherScholar-selves in public works of art through interactive reflections guided by an art elicitation framework.

This study chronicles how we used an arts-based version of photo elicitation (Epstein et al.) to help label and make meaning of our MotherScholar transitions as we moved from surviving COVID-19 into an uncertain return to normal for the fall 2022 academic year while navigating complex facets of our identities as our children naturally aged and transitioned into new stages of life. During times of personal and global uncertainty, this study forced us to make space and time to turn our focus inwards to notice the vulnerability, care, and love that sustains us as we are forced to focus on the external world that often moves too fast and demands too much of us as MotherScholars. This study collectively investigates the following: (1) the use of art elicitation to reflect on the flexible nature of MotherScholarhood and (2) the resulting freedom to temporarily reformat the “MotherScholar” term to best fit our current individual personal-professional experiences. As a secondary undertaking, the study seeks to present an art elicitation process that other MotherScholars may use to help find meaning and make sense of their identity in times of transition.

## Theoretical Background

This study speaks to realities unique to those in higher education who claim a specific identity: *MotherScholar*.<sup>1</sup> First coined by Cheryl Matias as “Mother-scholar” and further explored as “Mother-Scholar” by Yvette Lapayese, Lapayese describes how the identity uses “the feminist impulse to dismantle patriarchal binaries” (17) while also “[finding] creative ways to insert ... maternal identity, specifically in academic spaces and in their scholarship” (23). Like Anna CohenMiller, we accept that the MotherScholar identity must constantly be reexamined and reworked so that it can shift and grow, including reformatting the term to intentionally reflect changing truths and feelings within individuals writing about themselves.

Our research with other MotherScholars has “found that the MotherScholar identity demonstrates tensions, subjectivities, pluralities, and embodiment of multiple identities exacerbated by the sheltering at home conditions of COVID -19” (qtd. in Spradley et al. 228). Using a crystalizing layered approach, we have previously documented what Cheryl Matias explained as “the strains of work life balance during [the early months of] a global pandemic ... [documenting] how MotherScholars experience research during COVID -19” (247) while also recognizing and reflecting on those innate qualities that equip us with the unique ability to survive the pandemic rollercoaster.

Many of our story-plot points from pre-COVID-19 studies resurface in this

study. Ever-present is the need to survive the unique challenges brought about because of our MotherScholar identities but so is our natural ability to build support systems that help us bend without breaking. Lauren Burrow et al. illuminate the need for time spent in cohort with and to receive validation from other MotherScholars; they conclude that arts-based self-study in a group of trusted MotherScholar friends can lead to the creation of a community. This current study, therefore, builds from Burrow et al.'s previous scholarly conclusion and tweaks the methodology to make room for each of us, as continued coauthors, to individually investigate and critically reflect on the malleable nature of MotherScholarhood. The changes to our original study were intentional to allow our identities to shift and stretch due to external pressures (controllable or not) and to invite reconsideration of the temporal naming of a deeply personal identity during seasons of change—natural, willing, unexpected, and/or necessitated.

## **Methodology**

Throughout our interconnected studies, we have all acted as both investigators and participants (i.e., researcher-participants). Within this collaborative autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner; Ellis et al.), Lauren (the first author) utilized art elicitation (Burrow and Burrow) as a data collection tool to lead interviews focussed on reflections about our shifting positionality within our MotherScholarhood when impacted by COVID-19 and other natural motherhood changes.

### *Arts-Based Methodology*

In 2017, we (and another MotherScholar not part of this specific study) embarked on a collaborative friendship study with participatory arts-based methods to identify and understand personal-professional benefits only realized from embracing the blended reality of our MotherScholarhood (Burrow et al.). Research findings from Burrow et al. suggest that arts-based self-study in a group of trusted MotherScholar friends can serve as critical support in academia, where competition and patriarchy often create institutional and personal power structures that force MotherScholars into rivalry instead of into supportive feminist communities. This study continues the coauthors' commitment to community-based care through the arts, but unlike in Burrow et al, researcher-participants did not engage in art making, but rather were asked to simply participate in the more passive yet deeply retrospective act of art looking.

In its simplest form, art looking is a four-step process in which individuals look at a work of art, describe what they see, interpret and assign meaning to the work of art, and then make connections to their own life or other works of

art (Museum of Fine Arts Houston). So, although the process of art creation was shown to be effective in supporting our previous sense making of the complex MotherScholar identity within complicated work-life experiences, it can be a much more time-consuming practice than art looking. This study's switch from "making" to "looking" was, therefore, in direct response to and with respect for not wanting to add to our overburdened, overscheduled, and overworked selves during COVID-19. Ultimately, art looking was a less time-consuming yet still highly effective method for supporting research-participants' reflection on and interpretations of the transitioning we were naturally experiencing as our children aged and as we navigated the unpredictable and unexpected personal-professional impacts of COVID-19.

### *Friendship Methodology*

While collaboratively undertaken, there is always a practical necessity for one of us to step in as the primary interpreter to craft a cohesive story. Lauren acted as primary researcher—trusting in friendship methodology to support her interpretative lens. Lisa Tillmann-Healy proposes that if a community creates relationship-driven spaces, it can provide the foundation for "friendship as method" (732) as a qualitative approach to research. Friendship methodology includes principles of interpretivism (Denzin) and interactive interviewing (Ellis et al.), which are also hallmarks of photo elicitation.

### *Art Elicitation as Data Collection*

All researcher-participants investigated two series of public works of art that were preselected by Lauren. Researcher-participants viewed the art through a series of art looking tasks which Lauren designed to prompt intentional and focussed self-reflection on the meaning and experiences of MotherScholarhood during COVID-19. This creative, arts-prompted reflective process was first introduced to Lauren during a summer teachers' institute with the Smithsonian National Museum of Art; Lauren then explored the process as a method of data collection as a mother-son activity in Burrow and Burrow. Lauren likens this process to both photovoice and photo elicitation. Like photovoice (Wang), photo elicitation uses photographs or other visual mediums as a data collection tool to facilitate interactive interviewing. Photo elicitation is meant to "[draw] out or [bring] forth emotions" by "trigger[ing] or evoke[ing] responses, memories, or stories" from participants (Coppie). Since the interviewing prompts were works of art, this study will refer to the data collection process as "art elicitation" (Burrow and Burrow 186).

## Analysis

Lauren, as first author, manually analyzed data using Matthew B. Miles et al.'s two-cycle process and maintained a reflective journal throughout to document analytical memos. She listened deeply and asked caring questions of the photo captions to make space for the full range of emotions, thoughts, and truths that our identities inherently, intentionally, and (sometimes) unconsciously possess (Geist-Martin et al.). As Lauren analyzed all responses to the art elicitations, the inherent nature of friendship methodology increased her confidence that her narrative analysis was not merely at the mercy of each art looker's recollection or introspection but rather intuitively informed by our intersecting friendships with each of the researcher-participants.

## Data Sources

As researcher-participants, our identities are central to the study. As cisgender, white mothers with middle-class financial status, we acknowledge the privileges embedded in and the accompanying power that we hold based purely in our identities. Table 1 summarizes our racialized, familial, and situational identities at the time of this study.

**Table 1. Relevant demographics for the coauthors at the time of study August 2022**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Mother Scholar</b>   | Lauren  |
| <b>Familial Status</b>  | Three children, aged ten to thirteen; married   |
| <b>Race</b>   | White   |
| <b>Gender</b>   | Female  |
| <b>Academic Status</b>  | Tenured, associate professor  |
| <b>COVID-19 Experiences and Current Life Stage for Children</b> | Remained fully online, working from home for university (2020-2022); transitioning to f2f and online work at university (fall 2022).<br>Children enrolled in online public elementary and middle school, attending from home (2020-2022); all children transitioning to local public middle and private elementary schools (fall 2022). |

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|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Mother Scholar</b>   | Chrissy  |
| <b>Familial Status</b>  | Four children aged eleven to sixteen; divorced   |
| <b>Race</b>   | White  |
| <b>Gender</b>   | Female   |
| <b>Academic Status</b>  | Tenured, associate professor   |
| <b>COVID-19 Experiences and Current Life Stage for Children</b> | Returned to face to face (f2f) work at university (fall 2021).<br>All children enrolled in local public elementary and middle school (2020-22); children graduating into local public middle and high schools (2022-23). |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Mother Scholar</b>   | Heather   |
| <b>Familial Status</b>  | Three children aged nineteen to twenty-five; married  |
| <b>Race</b>   | White   |
| <b>Gender</b>   | Female  |
| <b>Academic Status</b>  | Tenured, full professor   |
| <b>COVID-19 Experiences and Current Life Stage for Children</b> | Returned to f2f and online work at university (fall 2021).<br>Daughters enrolled in colleges (one in state, one out of state) seeking undergraduate and JD degrees, son completing high school (2020-21); eldest daughter graduated law school, second daughter pursuing doctorate (out of state), son returning to undergraduate college (out of state) (2021-23). |

*Art Elicitation Selections*

Lauren selected two series of art to prompt researcher-participants’ interactive self-interviewing through an art elicitation technique. She constructed a step-by-step process of art looking written out for all of us to independently follow within a predetermined window (approximately two weeks). First, each of us, individually and independently, scanned all works of art presented in each series, taking mental notes of what stood out or was simply noticed. Next, Lauren made Chrissy and Heather aware of the artist’s commentary about and/or intentions for the works of art. We all then returned, separately, to look at the art series through a lens specifically related to an aspect of MotherScholarhood: (1) how our MotherScholar identity has been represented during the early COVID-19 years and (2) how we choose to intentionally transform and/or maintain the written format for the naming of our current MotherScholar existence.

The first series was *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Japanese: 富嶽三十六景), a series of landscape prints by the Japanese ukiyo-e artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). The series depicts Mount Fuji from different locations and in various seasons and weather conditions; Mount Fuji is present in every print. All researcher-participants were instructed to view the recurrence of Mount Fuji throughout the art as symbolic representation of MotherScholarhood. We each selected two specific art prints that best captured the comparison between the positionality, significance, prominence, etc. of our individual MotherScholarhood during 2020-2021 COVID-19 versus our transition into the 2021-22 experience of COVID-19. We then provided a brief captioning explaining each of our art selections.

The second series was a selection of fourteen photographs of Daniel Popper's permanent and temporary sculpture exhibits around the world. Although each sculpture takes on a different form, the works of art feature a commonality: Each presents a central figure surrounded by, composed of, inhabiting, and interacting with the elements to present a complicated perspective/. This series was selected to prompt individual reflection on the intentional formatting of the term "MotherScholar" to best represent its meaning and convey our feelings when writing about the current stage of our personal-professional lives. Like Popper's sculptures, there was consideration about whether our MotherScholar identities rely on the context of our environments or if they demand that our environments adapt to us.

## Findings

This section presents findings from two art elicitation exercises. In the initial data series, we each chose an individually chosen print from a common series by Hokusai and then wrote an accompanying narrative to explain how the print holds relevant symbolism to our personal perceptions of our MotherScholar experiences throughout the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the second data series, we each selected a work of art from Popper's public sculptures that we individually identified as being representative of our critical self-reflections on the personalized namings of our MotherScholar identities. Salient excerpts from our art-elicited selections are shared to provide insights into our sense making during times of uncertainty and change.

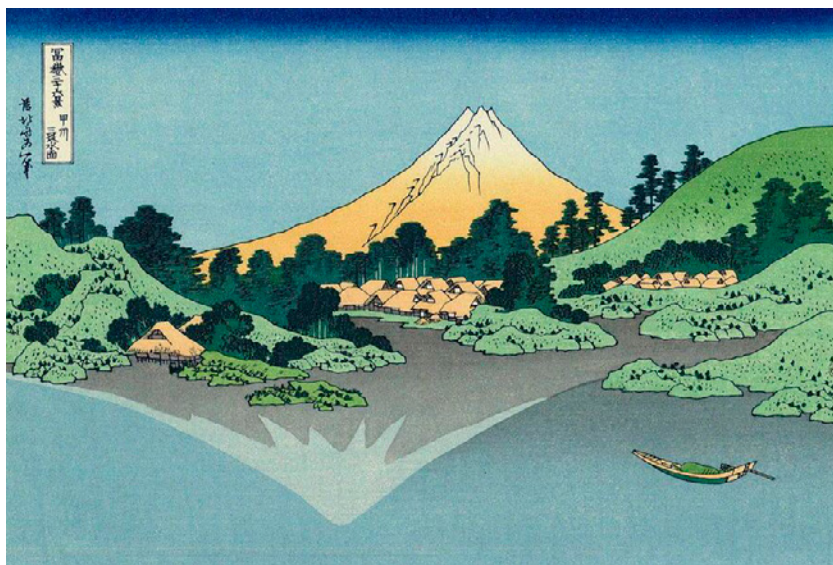


## Identifying Representations of COVID-19-impacted MotherScholarhood in Works of Art

### Lauren

When reflecting on her first year of COVID-19 (2020-2021), Lauren chose *The Fuji Reflects in Lake Kawaguchi, Seen from the Misaka Pass in the Kai Province* by Hokusai (see Figure. 1) to summarize her experiences, extending the timeline to include memories of pre-COVID-19 experiences and then focussing on the early months of 2020. Lauren explained her selection as follows:

Just before COVID-19 hit, my IHE [institute of higher education] passed what we all call “the kid ban”—no staff/faculty’s children allowed on campus. As a result, I was trying to steel myself up to attempt separation of my “mother” and “scholar” lives in order to set clear and self-preserving boundaries that looked like: If my kids can’t come up to work with me, then work can’t come home with me! Then COVID-19 hit. Boundaries were now impossible. For me, my “MotherScholar Mt.Fuji” was reflected EVERYWHERE during COVID-19. There was nowhere I could go (literally!) without my MotherScholar following me. I was MotherScholar morning, noon, and night. Zoom teaching in my foyer, next to my kids snacking in the kitchen, poodles at my feet; pausing my screen to comfort a kid, listening in on meetings with earbuds while helping disconnect some stuck Legos. My best course lessons were cotaught with an eight year old, bursts of brilliant writing were inspired by being surrounded by their curiosity and creativity all day. My MotherScholar Mt. Fuji was reflected for me—EVERYWHERE!



**Figure 1.** *The Fuji Reflects in Lake Kawaguchi, Seen from the Misaka Pass in the Kai Province* by Katsushika Hokusai. This work is in the public domain in the US because it was published (or registered with the US Copyright Office) before January 1, 1928. This image has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights.

Next, Lauren selected *Umegawa in Sagami Province* by Hokusai (see Figure. 2) as a representation of her MotherScholar experiences during the second year of the pandemic (2021-2022), with a narrative explanation that focussed on the then anticipation of fall 2022:

Well, everyone's going back, everyone's moving on, back to normal, back up to work. But not us. For me, this print is perfect: there's the five cranes (my family of five) staying in their puddle home while all the other birds fly away back to normal. I've read that cranes are considered a bird of happiness in Japanese culture, and oh! How my birds make me so happy. My MotherScholar Mt. Fuji looms tall and strong and beautiful: looking after our little space, protecting our family time together. My MotherScholarhood is making me a better mother and scholar. I've been so productive. I've taken better care of myself; I have memories that we'll always have! .... I do wonder, though, how long can we stay like this? How long can it just be us? How long can life just stay on our terms?



**Figure 2.** *Umegawa in Sagami Province* by Hokusai. This work is in the public domain in the US because it was published (or registered with the US Copyright Office) before January 1, 1928. This image has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights.

## Chrissy

When reflecting on her first year of COVID-19 (focussing on fall 2020 to spring 2021), Chrissy chose *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Katsushika Hokusai (see Figure. 3) to best represent her experiences. Chrissy explained her choice as follows:

During COVID-19, I felt small, used up, and insignificant. I was hit with wave after wave of personal trauma that impacted my identity in so many ways. In October of 2020, my grandfather died of COVID-19. In February of 2021, I asked my husband of nineteen years to move out because of his repeated infidelity. In March 2021, I sold my beautiful home that I loved and moved into a rent house, in the same month my aunt died of cancer. During that spring, I was also being targeted and retaliated against by my chair in my department, and all of this took place under the heavy weight of being a mother of 4 school age children in a worldwide pandemic. I was hit with wave after wave of trauma during the pandemic, and I had no idea of knowing what wave would hit me next. I remember falling in bed each night absolutely mentally and emotionally empty. Somehow, I survived those waves.



**Figure. 3.** *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Hokusai. This work is in the public domain in the United States (US) because it was published (or registered with the US Copyright Office) before January 1, 1928. This image has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights.

Chrissy then selected *Shichiri Beach in Sagami Province* by Hokusai (see Figure. 4) as a representation of her MotherScholar experiences during the second year of the pandemic (2021-2022). She shared her rationale for her selection as follows:

The tumult of the COVID 19 pandemic has calmed. And now I am at a point where I am confident in my identity as a MotherScholar. And even though I am still in the midst of the ocean that could turn back into the tumultuous waves of trauma at any time, I know that after the season of wild waves and being tossed every which way, I will again experience peace. After COVID-19, I have learned to really try to be present in the moments of peace. In this print, I can feel the gentle waves on my toes, smell the calming scent of salt in the air, and feel a gentle breeze on my skin. In its moments of peace, the ocean calms and invigorates me and prepares me for my next set of challenges and changes in weather.

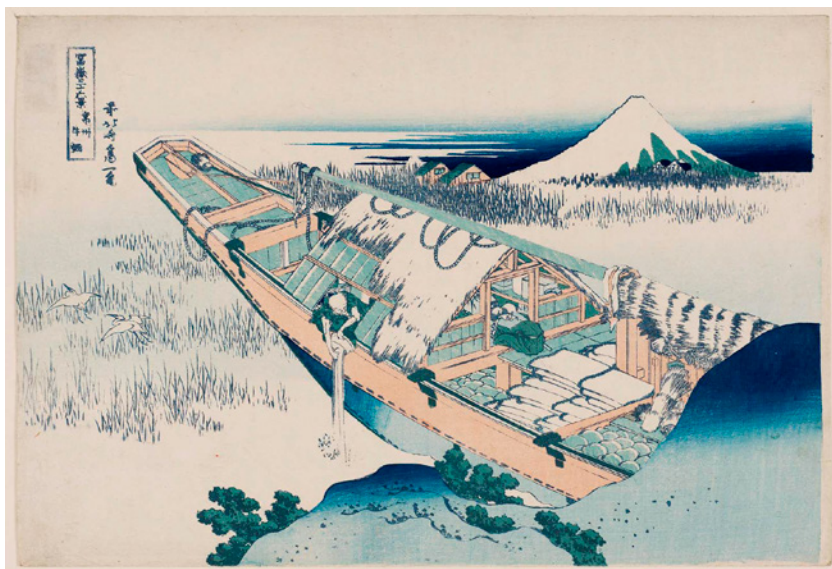


**Figure 4.** *Shichiri Beach in Sagami Province* by Hokusai. This work is in the public domain in the US because it was published (or registered with the US Copyright Office) before January 1, 1928. This image has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights.

## Heather

When reflecting on her first year of COVID-19 (2020–2021), Heather chose *View of Fuji from a Boat at Ushibori* by Hokusai (see Figure 5) to summarize her MotherScholar experiences. Heather explained her selection as follows:

Mt. Fuji is in the back, not as the primary focus of the painting (as in some other paintings) but as clearly prominent. If you were there, you might be working or relaxing in the boat, but that mountain would dominate the landscape / cast a shadow over everything / change the surrounding ecosystem, etc.... About my MotherScholarhood during COVID-19. It wasn't THE THING. THE THING was our nuclear family, together, at home, weathering COVID-19. My MotherScholarhood was ever present. It was always there. I couldn't escape it. I was always aware of it, noticing it, alternating between resting in the shade it provided and (unsuccessfully) trying to get out from under its shadow.... Maybe my women friends / colleagues are in the boat as well—working and resting—even though we don't see them. They were a hugely important part of surviving the first year+ of COVID-19. We mothered each other, and we helped each other with lots of work stuff.



**Figure 5.** *View of Fuji from a Boat at Ushibori* by Hokusai. This work is in the public domain in the US because it was published (or registered with the US Copyright Office) before January 1, 1928. This image has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights.

Choosing the same work of art as Lauren (*Umegawa in Sagami Province* by Hokusai, see Figure. 2), Heather shared divergent reasoning for her selection of the piece to represent her MotherScholar experiences during the second year of the pandemic:

I chose one where Mt. Fuji was bigger than the first one. And where there are some birds in the forefront and some flying in the sky... It's strange ... navigating empty nesthood is probably the hardest thing I've ever done. And mothering three kids to adulthood was really hard!... Mt. Fuji (MotherScholarhood) is bigger in this one, but really, it's more of an absence of the thing than the actual thing. I don't mean that I'm not a mother anymore, but the lack of something feels really big for me these days. Lack of daily interruptions, lack of people needing me to pick them up, feed them, pay attention to them, etc. It's a pretty big hole... I still have my friends / colleagues. I think they're the birds in the foreground as well. But they feel more apart from me (if I = MotherScholar = Mt. Fuji) than they did during the first two years of COVID-19. I feel much more alone than I did then. Kids gone, colleagues / friends more distant. Mother role still there, pretty big (though more its absence / whatever it's morphed into). Scholar role is still there, also big. But I'm going it alone now.

## Connecting to Works of Art as We Maintain / Reimagine / Shift the Written Formats of Our MotherScholar Identities

### Lauren

Reflections on the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic led Lauren to select Daniel Popper's *Asana* as a symbolic embodiment of her current naming of her *MotherScholar* identity, one in which she opts to add a purposeful italicized emphasis to the formatting to indicate a present shift in priority to her mother-self: *MotherScholar*. Popper's *Asana* is a sculpture of steel, wood, and natural fibres in the easily recognizable upwards-facing dog yoga position. Situated on a beach in Tulum, Mexico, only the top torso, outstretched arms, and head of the statue are fully completed. The remaining lower portion of the body is unfinished but is implied to be outstretched along the sands. Lauren explained her sculpture and term-formatting choice as follows:

Right now, being a *MotherScholar* is bringing me such peace, helping me stretch and grow as a woman with kids in academia (during a global pandemic!). I chose this sculpture because it seems to be stretching and reaching while surrounded by a peace and glow—growing in the place where she is planted is what is actually bringing her joy, right now. From my limited knowledge about yoga/Pilates (whatever stretching exercise the statue is doing), it's so good for your body while also pushing you to push through and past your physical limits. That's my *MotherScholarhood*, right now—it's hard, it's demanding, but simultaneously so peaceful, satisfying, and strengthening. I started to lower case "scholar" because I was feeling bad that I might not be showing up at my typical 210 per cent scholarship level. But I need to give myself more credit. Turning my attention to my motherhood core is actually making me a better scholar! I'm having to show up as mother, right now, and that's okay because it's taught me new levels of care, creativity, and understanding (for myself, family, students, and even my scholarly writing). So, I'm going to breathe these moments of *MotherScholarhood* deeply in and find some temporal peace in who I am, right now, exactly where I am (because it's just where I need to be). Let's see where this identity leads me...

### Chrissy

After reflecting on the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chrissy selected Daniel Popper's *Umi* as an accurate embodiment of her current naming of her *MotherScholar* identity as she opted to maintain our original,

collective formatting: MotherScholar (Burrow, et al.). “Umi” means “life” in Swahili and “mother” in Arabic and is meant to represent our world / Mother Earth as “a vast entanglement of living things that collectively define and maintain the conditions conducive to life” (Popper). Constructed of steel and GFRC (glass fiber–reinforced concrete), the sculpture presents the top bust of a female-faced figure with tree root-looking intertwining snaking to form her loosely pulled back hair, bodice, and skirt, which stretches to the ground to form an arch that visitors can enter into her body’s lower half. Her long, slender, and smooth arms are outstretched to seemingly lift up and hold open the arch of her skirt. The twenty-foot sculpture can currently be found at The Morton Arboretum, an outdoor tree museum in Lisle, Illinois. Chrissy explained how her sculpture choice represents her intentional naming of her identity:

My body and mind work together to create, carry, birth, and feed my children and also my scholarship. My children are both physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual pieces of my body and my motherhood. My scholarship, my writings also embody pieces of my DNA in their physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual composition. While my children and my scholarship often interrupt and challenge each other, they also feed and nurture each other. There is no part of me that doesn’t use my motherhood to influence my scholarship, and there is no part of my scholarship that doesn’t influence my motherhood.

## Heather

Finally, Heather chose Popper’s *Ven a la Luz* as a representative embodiment of her reimagined naming of her MotherScholar identity as a messy, complicated, colourful existence. She conveys both the deep meaningfulness and undeniable complicatedness of her COVID-19 MotherScholar identity with unpredictable splashes of color and random capitalizing / lower-casing of letters throughout the term: **MotHErSchOLaR**. Popper’s *Ven a la Luz* is a thirty-three-foot sculpture composed of steel, wood, rope, and natural fibres. In Spanish, the sculpture’s title means “come to the light,” and it depicts the top bust of a female figure with deep, decorative carvings over her face, arms, and chest. The face is slightly downturned, and eyes are closed; the head is encircled by a crown of carved flowers around upswept carved hair. A large archway is created by the prying open of nearly the entire chest by the sculpture’s own hands to reveal an open space that is filled with lush greenery that visitors can walk through—“the portal symbolizes our deep connection with Nature and ourselves” (Popper)—and is illuminated, internally, at night.



It is permanently located in Tulum, Mexico. Heather explains how this sculpture choice represented her changing MotherScholar identity after surviving the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic:

I chose this one because she's looking down into her body ... she's using her body to create a home, a space, that she is protecting. The thing in the inside is her essence. I feel like that about my MotherScholar identity. It's part of me; it's not separate or apart. It's not in distinct pieces like some of the sculptures. It's all one, and it's emanating from inside her (my) body. And I do protect it and nurture it—the mother and the scholar. They're huge parts of my identity as a woman / person / human.... [I] opt to write it in a way that complicates it in more ways than just capitalization and spacing between words (or lack thereof). It's so messy. It's not just mother or scholar or two things together (MotherScholar).

## Discussion

Returning to the study's goals to explore (1) the use of art elicitation to reflect on the flexible nature of MotherScholarhood and (2) the resulting freedom to temporarily reformat the MotherScholar term to best fit current individual personal-professional experiences, we found that connecting our deeply personal MotherScholar identities to public works of art (i.e., art elicitation) did provide a concrete way to process complicated times by capturing where we have been/what we have endured. Ultimately, this connection helped us maintain the core truths of our MotherScholar identities while also making space for temporal seasons of possibility and uncertainty. On behalf of all researcher-participants, Lauren discusses what our art elicitations reveal about each of our shifts beyond COVID-19 survival and towards powerful and intentional reclaimings of our collective MotherScholar identity—on individual terms that work best for each of us. Personal transitions experienced during COVID-19 led to individualized reimagining of, recommitment to, and rebalancing of each of our MotherScholar identities.

For herself, Lauren sees hopeful intentions to slow down and dig deeper into working on what matters while also protecting who matters most to her, embracing an emphasis on the *MotherScholar*, for now. In Chrissy, Lauren sees a capable MotherScholar who generously attributes her survival to supportive colleagues, but in actuality, she possesses her own deep resilience to rise above any struggle. Seeing her professionally thrive despite a bombardment of personal pains, Lauren is certain she will continue her successful hustle—and she will do it on her terms and with a knowing smirk. For Heather, Lauren notes a continued tenacity, unanticipated sense of

acceptance and happiness, and a transition to a broader definition of who makes her a “**MotHErSchOLaR.**” She understands the sacredness of social time with other females, and as such, Lauren sees her taking actions to ensure that there is a support system not only for herself as she shifts into empty nester MotherScholarhood but also for those beyond this MotherScholar research cohort who may not yet know that they will need a community.

## Conclusions

Ultimately, this study indicates that MotherScholars may need support from extended family (Lauren), colleagues and self (Chrissy), and friends (Heather) to be and feel successful throughout their multiple identities. For us, the need to seek out support was amplified during COVID-19 because support from our university employers was never felt by any of us—in policy or practice. As shown in our varied ways of surviving and shifting, we feel that MotherScholars are interconnected in their identities and can find support in that collective identity. We also acknowledge that so much of our MotherScholar identity is impacted by individual experiences, policies, and practices unique to our own personal/professional spaces, racialized identities, gender expression, socioeconomic status, etc.

After conducting a series of MotherScholar studies, pre-COVID-19 and during, we are resolute in our recurring conclusion that the MotherScholar identity both anchors us to core truths, values, and community and allows for the complex realities of individuals who are part of a MotherScholar whole. This study will push us to further explore what it means to be a MotherScholar and what MotherScholars might need in various stages of their renamed identity.

## Scholarly Significance

We acknowledge the privilege of being able to transform personal study into scholarly productivity and are ever thankful for journal spaces (like this one) that prioritize and value the academic study of our MotherScholarhood and allow us to count our personal pauses towards our professional productivity. We once again acknowledge that our multiple identities afford us the space, time, and means to routinely check-in on ourselves and each other. The scholarly practices that we were privileged enough to embrace to help us process and cope may not be feasible and accessible for all MotherScholars. It is our intention to push future scholarship to include and advocate for those MotherScholars that have been more severely affected and harmed during this time (including Black mothers and single mothers).

During a continuation into unknown times and challenges, we advocate for methods that make space for MotherScholars to reflect, grow, and change.

Thus, we see art elicitation as a viable methodology by which MotherScholars can process issues relevant to their scholarship while also creating room to care for themselves and make meaningful change in their personal-professional lives. We encourage MotherScholars to seek each other out, be their own support systems, and hold sacred the space and time of pausing together, especially during the uncertainty of shifting times.

## Endnotes

1. It has taken us time and multiple studies to accept ourselves as experts of our own identities. We thank readers for not wondering about the validity of the truths we are interrogating and uncovering in ourselves and instead invite readers to interrogate what this study brings up for their own intersecting identities and positionalities as either a MotherScholar themselves, or as one who has an impact on or is impacted by MotherScholars.

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