Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

25th Anniversary Issue on Mothering and Motherhood

Spring / Fall 2025 Vol. 15



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Visual Essay: Perspectives on Motherhood, Labour, and Emerging Technologies

This visual essay traces the concept of "full-time mother" proposed by Gillian Ranson in the first volume of this journal. It connects the concept to contemporary notions of motherhood, concerning how emerging technologies mediate the home and the workplace as prime contexts for mothering. In this visual essay, we think through images and symbols of work, technologies, and spaces using the means of collage and scan art while analyzing and critiquing the contemporary entanglement of motherhood and work, especially as digital technologies (re)produce the mandate that mothers need to excel both at home and at work. Moreover, through technological designs and narratives, we explore how excelling in those two realms is a measure and a standard for so-called good motherhood. The technologies studied and visually depicted include breast pumps, smart screens, and motherhood-related apps. Our visual and analytical exploration leads us to develop the concept of "prototypical motherhood," a term that we use to refer to the performative role of motherhood as mixed with the dynamics of productive work, which points towards progress, efficiency, and economic growth. In this sense, mothers must work in specific ways to meet certain ideals, promises, and standards. Prototypical motherhood operates as the dispositif, in Foucauldian terms, to frame what is possible for mothers and what mothers are capable of and able to control, so they remain within the confines of the overlapping relationship of care and productive work. We conclude with design provocations to reimagine technology and motherhood, and how this discussion could be extended to the social structures where we live today.

Motherhood, Labour, and Emerging Technologies

This visual essay has resulted from hours of conversations full of anecdotes, reflections, and discussions on what it means to mother in the United States (US) today. Our transnational experiences as Latina women who immigrated

to the US between 2018 and 2019 and became first-time mothers are the precedent for this work. Our intersections of gender, race, class, and academic background have been impacted by the way we experience the US politics of migration, with an increased sense of nonbelonging, especially with the rise of right-wing governments and policies demarcating who belongs here and who does not. In navigating belonging and rethinking the concept of family, we constantly negotiate the epistemologies of our upbringing in Colombia and Mexico, which share values and worldviews, with the values of American society and its visions of motherhood.

These negotiations have become evident in our academic work and our personal experiences as mothers. We constantly find ourselves thinking about or doing work while taking care of our daughters. Thinking together about this, we began to see how mothering and work have porous borders, as mothering is not only about caring for children but also about negotiating work before, during, and after caring. Where is the line? Is there a line? And if so, who demarcates it? The fact that we encounter a shock between being a mother and struggling to give boundaries to our productive work shows how these two spheres of our lives are interconnected. We realized that everything around us blurs the line. Spaces, objects, technologies, policies, discourses, and emerging technologies construct contemporary ideals of motherhood that have made the line less evident.

In this article, we position motherhood as a cultural construct shaped by discourses, laws, design practices, objects, spaces, technologies, and institutions, which are marked by power and privilege and therefore define not only the role of mothers but also the structure of contemporary US society. In this sense, motherhood is more than a phase in life or an identity one can identify with. It is a socioeconomic, cultural, political, and technological construct. To construct an analysis of how labour, technologies, and spaces are interconnected in the concept of motherhood, we begin by tracing antecedents of the relationship between motherhood and work through the contributions of various scholars-including Gillian Ranson, Sharon Hays, and Eileen Boris—to demonstrate how the home has historically been a contested space shaping and reconfiguring what is culturally expected of mothers and the different kinds of labour they perform. From there, we trace the evolution of the motherhood-work-place relationship by analyzing three sites where we identify contemporary tensions regarding mothering and reproductive labour. We name these sites: everywhere, home office, and bodies. We engage with these sites visually and propose a series of collages and scan art that drive the discussion about the way that technologies and users cocreate a specific reality for mothering.

Tracing Concepts of Motherhood Concerning Work

Twenty-five years ago, in the first volume of this journal, Gillian Ranson introduced the concept of the "full-time mother," framing motherhood experiences concerning women's roles as workers in and outside the home. Through her analysis of forty interviews with mothers in Alberta, Ranson found that the discourse of motherhood was largely shaped by the expectation that women must stay "full-time" at home to care for children. Ranson used the term "full-time" not only to demarcate time at home but also to classify the employment status of working mothers and the time they had available to spend with their children (58–62). Throughout the article, it became evident that even mothers who stayed at home did not spend all their time caring for their children, as many were engaged in other forms of work at home. Ranson concluded that the idea of the "full-time mother" serves as an ideological and symbolic device to confine mothers to the home, regardless of whether their work involved childcare or other forms of paid labour (65).

In 1993, Sharon Hays discussed the nuances and tensions of "intensive motherhood"—an ideology promoting the idea that the appropriate methods for mothering are often child centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbed, labour intensive, and financially costly. In her work, Hays questions the assumptions underlying intensive motherhood and its approach to childrearing. Some of these questions address how ideologies of institutions and products entering the home are being infiltrated into the family space, making it increasingly difficult to ideologically separate the private (the home) from the public sphere. According to Hays, these ideologies introduce the language of impersonal, competitive, commodified, efficient, profit-driven, and selfinterested relations. Much of Hays's discussion emphasizes that intensive motherhood does not fully align with the rationalization of life under capitalism. If capitalism offered efficient ways of performing all kinds of work, it could also lead to making childrearing, and mothering in general, less time consuming and more efficient. She even argues that by staying at home to mother intensively, mothers may not be merely accepting their condition but could also be resisting, or even opposing, social relations based on impersonal contractual systems prioritizing individual gain.

Eileen Boris's concept of "sacred motherhood" from 1985 also helps to make visible the relationship between mothering and work. Boris illustrates how motherhood ideals shaped the 1930s political debates on women's rights to work at home. The interference of gender-based social norms of sacred motherhood in these debates led to the banning of homework (productive activities connected to factory work, such as repairing shoes, performed at home), ultimately limiting work options for mothers, particularly those reliant on income due to insufficient employment opportunities for men at that time (745–63).

The work of Ranson, Hays, and Boris shows how discourses, ideals, politics, products, and labour conditions have shaped motherhood, its relations to the home, and the extent to which reproductive and care work can be performed in and outside the home. There is a reciprocal relationship between home, labour, and motherhood, as they have historically shaped one another.

Ranson's concept of "full-time mother" remains relevant for analyzing motherhood and mothering about both productive and reproductive labour. Ranson's work, similarly to Boris's in 1985, frames the ideal of motherhood as that of a Western and middle-class white woman staying at home to care for her children. Today, changes in gender roles, technology, and labour relations have expanded motherhood identity and ideologies to new spaces—especially the office. Mothers now can continue mothering intensively full-time as emerging technologies afford performing reproductive work in the office thanks to the popularization of electronic and now digitally empowered breast pumps. Simultaneously, other emerging technologies, labour relations, and global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have accelerated the integration of productive labour into the home.

Digital innovations for twenty-first-century motherhood in the US revolve around enabling (even more) work for mothers. This operates under an assumed conflict between productive work and caring work that needs to be resolved for the benefit of women, merging multiple forms of labour (productive and reproductive) into technological practices that suggest that mothers can, and should, efficiently and productively work anywhere, anytime. Yet these technological innovations further a social narrative of progress, which is tied to a moral judgment about the betterment of society, in this case, crystalized as a model for a good mother. As Jennifer Daryl Slack and John Macgregor Wise explain, "Culturally, the tendency to equate the development of new technology with material and moral betterment typically operates without making the assumptions explicit. In part, that is how assumptions gain their power. To interrogate them explicitly is to demystify their power" (11). Nowadays, excelling both at home and work is the standard for good motherhood. These ideas are supported by the "having it all" ideology that gained traction in the 1980s but continues to invite working mothers, particularly those in corporate environments, to remain as neverending productive human capital, even during times of intense reproductive labour, such as the postpartum periods. In conclusion, we refer to "prototypical motherhood" as a standardized motherhood ideal that demarcates what is acceptable, possible, and imaginable for mothers concerning work. Prototypical motherhood, thus, disciplines mothers to be workers of a certain kind in and outside the family. Through images and symbols, we explore how these phenomena coexist as they also transform our notions and uses of physical spaces.

Images and Symbols of Motherhood and Work

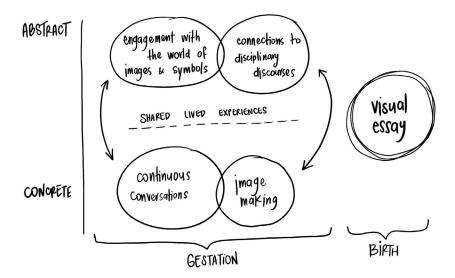


Figure 1. Visual description of the creative process to generate this visual essay

We found a moment to converge our intellectual and creative interests in motherhood, labour, and technologies, gestating ideas through continuous exchanges and conversations. The collage and scan-art pieces are both spaces to converge some of these conversations into a visual narrative, but more importantly, they are mechanisms to think through visuals and deepen our relationship to the image and symbol of motherhood (Figure 1).

We engaged with the visual narratives in advertising of motherhood-related technologies, used images from our households, and began a process of abstraction to convey meaning through repetition and fragmentation, which emerged as visual strategies in the creative process.

In the images, we highlight the role of objects and spaces because they have been designed with intention, many times congruent with the logic of the market and mass production. As Arturo Escobar affirms, "In designing tools, we (humans) design the conditions of our existence and, in turn, the conditions of our designing. We design tools, and these tools design us back" (10). This is in line with what feminist scholar and designer Anne Balsamo termed "technoculture," or the inextricable relationship between technologies and society in their overlapping processes of constant becoming (4–7). We find it important to critically look at designed systems, places and practices to find the cultural meaning of technologies, and in this case to scrutinize the ways they afford a nuanced understanding of motherhood and work.

As we think about our relationship to space in the US, design emerges as the connecting tissue, since it is through objects and practices that we exercise our motherhood. Thinking through images also allows us to access dimensions of thought beyond analysis, towards a sensibility for the aesthetics of objects, and their explicit and conceptual connections to space.

The work of mothering (what we refer to here as reproductive work and care work) and the productive work that earns a wage are not divided anymore. The collages emerged precisely because of this overlap. Indeed, we contend that there is no other way, outside of this juxtaposition, to describe the way that motherhood functions as a cultural construct and as a lived experience at the individual and collective levels today. As we began to work with objects and practices, it became evident that space is central to this conversation too, prompting us to construct a scenario for each piece.

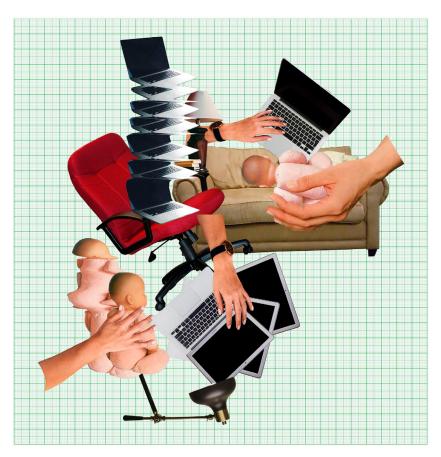


Figure 2. The overlap of mothering and productive work

In our experience, we have felt the need to split ourselves so we can do it all. Abstracting from this sensation to depict symbolic objects for the home and the office space, as well as emphasizing the simultaneity of the work, Figure 2 shows one hand taking care of a baby and the other one typing on a laptop, as a simple description of the entanglement across multiple forms of work.

With this opening image, we move into three specific sites for mothering, visually exploring how they are mediated by technologies. "Site One: Everywhere" deals with the breast pump and its ability to allow reproductive work to happen in the office space, enabling all spaces to become workspaces. "Site Two: Home Office" examines smart screens in the private space to manage the household as a productive unit and install standardized ways of doing care work. "Site Three: Bodies" explores the vast ecosystem of motherhood-related apps that create standards to measure all kinds of bioindicators and human activities to ultimately shape a certain kind of prototypical motherhood.

Site One: Everywhere

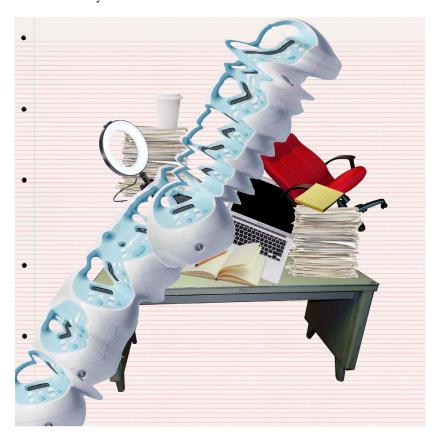


Figure 3. The breast pump and the workspace

Fully automated, portable, and disposable, contemporary breast pumps epitomize the complex relationship between motherhood and work. In recent years, the pumping culture has become the enabler of lactation experiences for working mothers in the US. The commercial and popular narratives associated with the breast pump position this device in a myriad of places. Thanks to its portability and size, and a plethora of accessories to make it more convenient, lactating people can pump breast milk in the park, on a plane, at work, at the gym, and more. However, our aesthetic decision to portray the office space as an abstraction of work in Figure 3 is a result of thinking of work as a "seed space," one that enabled this technology to exist in the first place, thus allowing work to permeate all private and public spaces.

Common ads for the breast pump show a lactating person doing work on their laptop or participating in a meeting while pumping their breasts, and pumping while their baby is sitting next to them. The ads suggest that the breast pump increases mothers' productivity, hence allowing them to "have it all" (work and family), especially as they help make pumping look easy and accessible. However, the simplicity portrayed in the ads falls short of accurately documenting the reality of using a breast pump. Operating this device involves arduous processes of preparing, cleaning, sterilizing, and organizing, in addition to the work of making the milk ready for consumption.

The corporate narratives associated with the breast pump deserve more scrutiny. As Michelle Millar Fisher and Amber Winick assert, "These 'time-saving' devices maximized productivity behind the scenes so that women could do double (or triple) duty while making it all look effortless" (259). By pumping breastmilk behind the scene, mothers seem to operate as members of a secret society, moving between home and work. Not only does the work of pumping become invisible because it is private and hence always carried out in enclosed spaces, following historical positions about the invisibility of breastfeeding (Stearns 313), but it greatly benefits employers because it ensures that employees are productive all the time, even if they are lactating. In short, the breast pump solidifies a cultural mandate of breastfeeding at all costs.

Parallel to creating more work for mothers, the forms and dynamics of labour enabled by the breast pump are mutable and already experiencing transformations based on mothers' multiple social contexts: Some mothers at the postpartum stage with financial needs have found ways to make money with the breast pump and produce a surplus of breastmilk that can be exchanged online for money, diapers, or anything (Cassidy). The breast pump creates new forms of work while challenging traditional conceptions of productive and reproductive labour and the monetary value assigned to them.

Working mothers remain tied to the ideology of the "full-time mother," but the home is no longer the only space in which they are expected to mother. The domestic space, once solely associated with reproductive labour, is now everywhere—in lactation rooms at the mall, the airport, the workplace, or social events. Conversely, the workplace is no longer just the factory or office as we once understood it in the twentieth century. Productive work has returned to the home, like the preindustrial era. Mothers are now expected to mother full-time everywhere.

Site Two: Home Office



Figure 4. Smart screens and managerial thinking for the household

Akin to the monoliths that appear in the science fiction film 2001: A Space Odyssey (sketched in Figure 5) and the colossal Barbie character that lands at the beginning of the 2023 Barbie movie (sketched in Figure 6), we deal with an artifact that lands at the core of a household. Just as the two visual references, its glorious presence attracts everyone's gaze, precisely because it is starkly different from its environment (Figure 4). These cinematographic

references are conducive to thinking about how motherhood-related technologies enter the private space, how they reconfigure it, and how they ultimately represent a historical merging of reproductive and productive labour by provoking the emergence of a hybrid space between home and work.

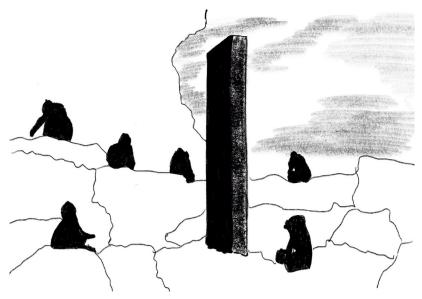


Figure 5. Sketch of a monolith from the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey

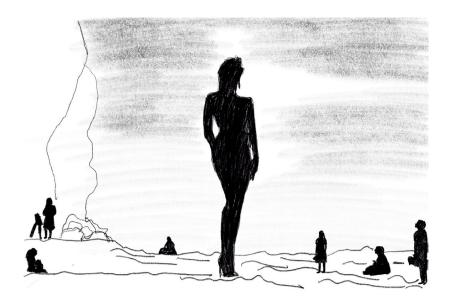


Figure 6. Sketch of a colossal figure from the movie Barbie

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about shifts to redesign intimate spaces and workspaces to blend them under the logic of management and control. Terms like "working from home" or "home office" symbolize this merging. In the context of motherhood, we are witnessing the proliferation of technologies for managing motherhood and housekeeping tasks. Large-scale screens or "smart displays," embedded with software for managing tasks, are meant to be used in the private space to organize, prioritize, and delegate duties and roles, ensuring that the household runs as a productive unit.

The positioning and hierarchy of the screen in Figure 4 relate to the godlike qualities of these technologies. To achieve their purpose of maximizing efficiency, these devices promise to know more than parents about how they run the household, to recommend the best for them, and to make decisions on their behalf. Since the algorithms and internal structure of these technologies necessarily simplify and abstract the context where they operate, the fluidity of human relations is overwritten by assuming that the needs of parents and children are predictable, programmable, and, therefore, controllable.

Smart displays and other interconnected technologies are successful business models because of their ability to capture, segregate, and sell users' data—more than their ability to create useful systems and interfaces for users. This furthers the dynamics of data capitalism, defined by Sarah Myers West as "a system in which the commoditization of our data enables an asymmetric redistribution of power that is weighted toward the actors who have access and the capability to make sense of information" (20). Capturing data and prompting decision-making are manipulative and a disguised form of control, since the ultimate beneficiaries of these technologies are profit-driven organizations that establish a hierarchical relationship with their users.

The narratives associated with smart displays relate to neoliberal feminist manifestos, such as Ivanka Trump's book *Women Who Work*, where she refers to the time spent with children to create memorable moments as "correct investments." Similarly, in advertisements for Heart Display, a smart screen product, its founders invite users to take care of their homes in terms of management, the same way they take care of their businesses or corporate jobs (Heart Display).

Furthermore, the symbol that these technologies represent is tied to motherhood identity. The narrative and strategies of smart displays further the idea that good motherhood is planned, organized, and efficient. Under managerial thinking, what is right is to keep the house neat and controlled and to complete tasks within an expected timeline. Conversely, it is not right to improvise or to be disorganized, to get out of the routine and to not be productive. In their efforts to standardize how households should run, tech corporations shape an ideal path for decision-making, where mothers and families are provided with a template for behavior and identity construction,

both as parents, and workers.

Physical spaces and work have been historically used to define motherhood. In 1999, Gillian Ranson explored how the extent to which mothers measured their motherhood was based on a Western ideal—rooted heavily in the experiences of middle-class white families—that assumed mothers spent all their time at home with their children doing care work. In 2024, ideals of motherhood are closely tied to productive work: Mothers who decide to stay at home have lost their value and status. To exist within this tension, we are witnessing a turn by some Latin American mothers and thinkers who advocate for reclaiming the act of staying at home with children as a valid and sufficient space for exercising motherhood, complicating ideas on the home space and solitude, and calling for embracing instead of fighting with the ambivalence of mothering across spaces (Vasquez 175–80).

As Jessica Martucci explores in the book *Back to the Breast*, mothers have historically resisted hospital policies and cultural norms, specifically the pressure of formula companies in America in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, when mothers were intentionally choosing to breastfeed (Martucci). What we see today is a kind of "back to the home" as a form of counterpressure to the productive work mandate.

In the home space, productive and reproductive work are in continuous tension. In this scenario, technologies mediate hybrid spaces to ensure that mothers are embedded in the logic of work even when planning a shopping list for the supermarket, enjoying a television show, or attempting to rest from work.

Site Three: Bodies

Similarly to the way techno-capitalism is appropriating physical spaces, it is simultaneously taking over the body as the most intimate space. The rise of digital platforms brought about the idea of measuring everything to see the body. Body tracking technologies measuring heart rate, sleep, temperature, blood pressure, and even stress levels have paved the way for technologies directed towards mothers, enabling the measurement of motherhood faster and more intensely than ever before, under the promise of easing motherhood and driving an estimated market value of two trillion dollars (Mason and Pasieka 7–8). Today, we find digital platforms for almost every aspect of motherhood: apps that track how many diapers are changed, how much sleep the mother and baby get, how many ounces of breastmilk the baby consumes, episodes of postpartum mood swings, and more. This is the meaning in Figure 7, with the fragmentation of life across technological systems that function against a backdrop of data collection and extraction practices.



Figure 7. Fragmentation of the mothering experience in the ecosystem of apps and data gathering

What is interesting about these applications is not only the increasing compulsion to measure everything but also how they transform what is measured into an operation, meaning they function or operate within larger systems. For example, if a mother's mood swings exceed normal levels, the app may refer her to a doctor to treat what is likely postpartum depression. If the breastmilk production is deemed above or below normal, the app may suggest consulting a lactation expert. If the baby is not sleeping the right number of hours, it may connect with a sleep trainer. These apps are part of broader systems that, in operation, shape the construction of motherhood. Some of these systems are linked to medical institutions, while others are connected to nonmedical institutions, such as employers or corporations, who now, in many cases, provide these technologies as part of employee benefits. In this scenario,

working mothers suffering from postpartum depression might be referred to a therapist and depending on the root cause may even be directed to career coaches.

The body becomes fragmented within the interconnected systems of health and labour. Both systems pressure postpartum mothers to restore their bodies and return to work as soon as possible. Simultaneously, by bringing these devices into the body, tech giants and data management companies gain power over people's habits and behaviours. This is a perfect recipe for targeted advertising and the entanglement of motherhood with consumption.

The platformization of maternal health extends beyond individuals accessing apps on their devices, solidifying the role of employers as gateways to access these services. For most problems related to pregnancy, childcare, and work, startup business models include partnerships with employers, further fuelling the narrative of supporting mothers at work. This approach aims to solve the motherhood problem of having mothers stay at home and not return to work. In corporate terms, supporting motherhood means providing the tools or benefits for mothers to ease the separation from their children so that they can continue working.

The moral mandate is applicable here too, since these technologies are inseparable from our ideals of good mothering. The more app-literate the mother, the more in control she is, and the better mother she can become. Having a numerical value and a standard to reach serves as a mechanism to judge one's performance. It quantifies and standardizes the function of mothers to create specific ways of childrearing.

Prototypical Motherhood

The ideologies advanced by emerging technologies and their manifestation as social practices and physical spaces ultimately build up what we understand as motherhood in a specific manner. They create a prototype in which mothers might or might not fit. In this prototype, concepts of good and bad motherhood demarcate what mothers can or should do based on the logic of productivity, progress, and economic growth.

We refer to prototypical motherhood as a performative role that is mixed with the solution that technocapitalism has to offer. Prototypical motherhood is, as Judith Butler's concept of performative suggests, a performance people act out not as theatre but as a reiterative practice shaped by discourse. The work of Gina Chen in her study of the term "mommy blogger" is a perfect example of the performative and discursive effect of prototypical motherhood in digital culture. Her study and critique of the term asserts that it reinforces women's hegemonic normative roles as nurturers (8-13).

Prototypical motherhood serves as a dispositif in Foucauldian terms to frame what is possible for mothers and what they are capable of. The dispositive is a mechanism that maintains and exercises power within the social context in which mothers experience reality. The knowledge, discourses, laws, design practices, objects, spaces, technologies, and institutions in which motherhood and work are experienced are embedded within a mesh of power relations that demarcate what motherhood is and what can be imagined, hoped for, and acted upon. In prototypical mothering, the work-life balance ideal is nothing more than an endless loop of work, whether productive or reproductive, yet heralded as the pinnacle of modern womanhood, reinforcing the very core of what keeps motherhood gendered and isolated.

Prototypical motherhood is not a static concept or a fixed ideal towards which aspirations and identities are directed. It is better understood as emerging, always moving, in continuous internal reframing. Under this logic, motherhood is therefore mouldable, reimaginable, and possible to recreate if we readjust its internal relations.

As the work of caring is highly fragmented in the ecosystem of apps and technological solutions, we end up functioning under someone else's logic for mothering, furthering the isolation in which mothers exist. To resist this, we need to imagine ourselves differently. To resist individually and collectively, we can foster visual narratives and design practices that intentionally reimagine practices and technologies that validate and give rise to a plurality of ways for mothering. Under the overwhelming context of mothering and technology, we are left thinking about how we can design our mothering, choosing the tools we need, and how this can lead to collective forms of resistance against prototypical ways of being and doing. What set of negotiations do we need to put in place to carve space for shaping unique and not generalizable forms of mothering? What would communal ways of existing look like, and how could technologies aid us in strengthening relationships? How much pleasure and joy have been taken away from mothering and from work, and what are the paths for us to reconnect with those?

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Journal of the Motherhood Initiative 25th Anniversary Issue