Academic Exploitation: *Currere* as Getting Lost in Motherhood

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This work teases apart myriad tensions parent-scholars experience, embody, and endure in navigating academia as we situate ourselves within considerate self-reflection and intentional dialogue via a method of *currere* (Pinar, 1975). Intent on unpacking individual and overlapping experiences, we, the authors, with respect to our positionalities, both identify as white, able-bodied, cisgender females. One author is a queer transracial adoptive mother, and one is a heterosexual biological mother. It is through narrative, autobiographical, curricular conversations that we reexperience our past curricula of mothering.

The process of *currere*, derived from the Latin "infinitive form of curriculum meaning to run the course" (Pinar, 2012, p. 44), emphasizes curriculum as a complicated intertextual conversation to underscore specific places in particular moments of history. *Currere* asserts a postmodern curriculum that encourages a critique of academic knowledge in hopes of engaging participants to labor in curriculum just as curriculum is a result of such labor. Deprived of ignorance, which once allowed us to indiscriminately follow hegemonic ideals, today we find ourselves constrained by the innumerable, inescapable, and often intolerable possibilities of choice. Motherhood, as we understand it, is embodied and experienced by a wide array of individuals—not limited by one's gender identity, sexual orientation, or biological relationships. However, our experiences as mothers are uniquely our own and, as such, are impacted by our historically marginalized identities as women in the academy.

Academic exploration has transformed our multifaceted, yet compartmentalized, identities as academics, educators, women, spouses, and mothers to the unrecognizable, often non-negotiable, assemblage we reckon with now. As newly formed parent-scholars, we find it difficult to differentiate the multiple facets of our identities from one another while navigating the praxis of critical theory. We embody hybrid identities that demand an interrogation of seemingly trivial parental choices and their impacts on our children's livelihoods, happiness, and educational opportunities (Noddings, 2003).

Accustomed to hiding behind masks of complacency, while at other times dichotomously refusing to be ignored, our needs scream for attention—through inner voices and our children's needs. Restless nights fraught with skewed reasoning and justification of our imperfect choices, ongoing paradoxical concerns, and conundrums of choice create an aggregate of *currere* and what Lather (2001) calls "working the ruins," which is our method. The ruins of our experiences and inability to make sense of or control the data that emerge from our lives create sites of possibility that allow us to move from realist to interrogative work of reflexivity through inquiry, "knowing through not knowing, knowing both too little and too much" (Lather, 2001, p. 205).

William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet (1976) encouraged students and educators to engage with the present in meaningful ways by first reconstituting and understanding past experiences through the aesthetic process of *currere*. By reading and writing the self in relation with the world as a reflection and anticipation of possibilities for the future, Pinar and Grumet (1976) imagined *currere* as the core of curriculum inquiry. By subjectively unearthing complex past experiences and recognizing temporality, we delve into past iterations, reexperiencing specific moments to gain a clearer vantage point of

Roach, W. N., & Bryant, E. (2022). Academic exploitation: *Currere* as getting lost in motherhood. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *6*(2), 98–106.

the present. Applying Derridan deconstruction to the work of *currere* as post-qualitative study, we find similarities in Lather's (2007) post-structural analysis of subject formation and subjectivity that requires complex negotiations of relations to various inter/intra-acting axes of power.

Rethinking what academic validity might mean in light of post-foundational discourse theory, Lather (2012) offers four frames that might position validity "as a space of constructed visibility," which allow the "underthought of thought" to be seen (p. 120). Of these proposed framings, the fourth, termed *Voluptuous/Situated Validity*, posits traditional scientific epistemology as shaped by a "male imaginary" and encourages asking "what the inclusion of a female imaginary would effect where the female is other to the male's Other" (Lather, 2012, p. 125). This divergent frame acts against the "murder of the mother" central to Western culture (Irigaray, 1985) as the researcher's authority is not granted by attempted "objectivity," but through engagement, entanglement, and the "risky practice" (Sawiki, 1991, p. 103) of self-reflexivity that underlies feminist praxis by bringing ethics and epistemology together (Lather, 2012).

We are imbricated throughout experiences, such that we cannot separate pieces of ourselves from that of our work. This situatedness, according to Lather's (2012) frames toward the post-qualitative, offers us validity. By reliving experiences as memories through Pinar's (1976) method of *currere*, we change how these events interact with the present, thus, acknowledging a potential to change history itself.

A Palimpsest of Self

We construct failed negotiations and view ourselves through a deficit lens of "should and could," positioning active roles as mothers against the naive parenting aspirations of our youth—the ephemeral "perfect working mother" we occasionally see in ourselves in a masterful moment and then apply as our standard of behavior in every moment thereafter—fuel for an inner narrative of ruthless critique. Family, friends, colleagues, and strangers remark on their astonishment of working mothers (more so than that of other caregivers) and working academics, of which we are both, who seem to navigate multiple schedules, temperaments, and responsibilities with ease. There is nothing easy about it. Yet, in a perplexing contradiction, this positive recognition from others continues to center our faults over our accomplishments, as we are often lauded as superheroes but are rarely offered help or leniency.

What follows is our offering of a duo-*currere* on how we have come to understand motherhood and, as such, our roles as mothers in society. Through this split text, we attempt to relive, without hierarchy or distinction, pivotal moments of our respective upbringings, highlighting how they exist in tandem. In doing so, we hope to explicate differences in our experiences as children, which informed our perceptions of required roles, expectations, and actions of motherhood.

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I grew up in a Southern Baptist home as a pastor's daughter. To those familiar with white evangelical Christian culture, this sentence alone conveys much of my early experiences with and understanding of gender roles. Most of the assumptions these people would make would be correct. My upbringing was very conservative,	My understanding, knowledge, and expectations of motherhood are rooted deeply in my upbringing and the ways I experienced my Mother's maternal responsibility and role. Today, my Mother describes herself as a phenomenal father. That is to say, she proclaims that her limited

very white, very much about appearances, and even more about internalizing shame, especially for women, as a need for repentance, and, thereby, salvation.

In other ways, it wasn't as bad as one might expect. My father was one of the rare and radical Baptist ministers who believed women can and should teach and lead in the church, even to men, and encouraged me to learn and grow spiritually on my own. (Fortunately, that spiritual journey has led me very far indeed from my Baptist foundations, but I long ago learned to speak in the theological language that resonates with him, and I have convinced him to "trust God with my journey." He mostly does, as long as I strategically avoid certain troublesome topics.)

My Mother stayed at home to raise me and my brother, and she did all the household duties that came along with this role. My father was gone most of the time working at the church or on some associated project, and all of the work fell on her shoulders. I am only now beginning to realize what that must have meant for her. When he was home, he was a strict disciplinarian, but I always knew he loved me. We recited often, in a singsong refrain after being given instructions: "Obedience is: Doing what you're told to do, when you're told to do it, with a happy heart." I had a safe and sheltered childhood. I was at church all day on Sundays, attended every church event offered for kids throughout the week, and talked excitedly about my church and my Jesus to all my childhood friends.

I once bouth a Spice Girls CD, and my Mother referred me to a Christian counselor within the church to explain how precious women's bodies are to God and that we shouldn't celebrate exploiting ourselves. I understood and felt terrible for still enjoying singing along with my friends when my parents weren't around. According to any Southern Baptist, mine would have been the and instead describes her role as that of a financial provider and a poor nurturer. Defining her parental role in this way speaks volumes to the social influences and attachments on designated roles of binary parent figures.

Throughout my adolescence and early teens, my Mother was undoubtedly the most beautiful, feminine, and accomplished woman in the world. She was petite and thin, had light blue eyes, delicate mannerisms, and demanded the attention of all those present. She was a powerhouse of authority, owning her own business and filling her free time with activities that interested her. To me, she was the ideal of modern womanhood.

I, however, with my awkward, not yet fully developed sense of queer Otherness, however, failed to model any of her defining feminine characteristics. Instead, I presented myself as overly confident, had little interest in women's fashion, refused to follow feminine trends, and was generally self-sufficient— refusing the help of men or boys.

My Mother trusted and respected me as an autonomous human being. She rarely inquired about where I was or with whom I was spending time. My Mother never questioned my interest or involvement in school, with homework, or in education broadly. She allowed me the freedom to explore my physical place in the world through multiple DIY piercings and various rainbow-colored hair options.

As a Christmas present at age 13, she placed an orange peel up my right nostril to protect my septum while shoving a large diaper pin through the outside flesh of my nose; she quickly filled the new hole with an old earring

ideal upbringing, apart from my father's radical belief that I should take spiritual learning upon myself, which I'm sure they would contend has been my downfall toward my present state of feminist depravity.

For the most part, as a child, these gender roles seemed natural to me. It was never a problem to me that I was given the nurturing and household pretend toys while my brother played sports and collected Pokemon. My parents tried to put me in softball once, and I hated it. I sat in the outfield looking for ants and flowers. On one occasion, a ball miraculously landed right next to me and nearly knocked down the twig house I had built. I simply picked it up and leisurely walked it to the pitcher. That was my job right, get the ball to the pitcher? I couldn't understand why the parents were all yelling at me. That was my last childhood softball game. Nevertheless, I was routinely called a "tomboy" for reasons I still can't understand, perhaps simply because I liked being outside—creating, exploring, and getting messy.

My first real experiences that led me to the realization that the gender-based expectations placed on me were not at all natural came in adolescence when purity culture hit my world with full force, and I attempted wholeheartedly to supplant my identity with the "Proverbs 31 Woman"—imaginary superhero (even in the text, not a real person) who. with the help of a full staff, takes care of her husband, children, and the poor in her community, manages a vineyard, buys and sells land, keeps a strong and beautiful physique, wears only the finest clothes, trades internationally, and gives wise instruction, all while her husband sits around all day with the other men at the temple gate—somehow interpreted to mean that women's place is in the home while men work to support the family financially. and proclaimed my new nose piercing a success!

We held long conversations about future financial aspirations: which businesses I should start and how to best profit from them. She allowed my friends and my then-girlfriend to spend evenings with me in my bedroom. I recall only a few (less than 3) instances when my Mother lost her temper or disciplined me for my multiple teenage mistakes. She was a stellar adult who allowed me to live my life as I so desired.

By age 15, I was out as a Lesbian, in an egregiously inappropriate relationship with a woman well into her 20s, I had essentially dropped out of school, and I felt utterly hopeless. My Mother understood my struggles as yet another challenge to address—though the visibility of my undesirable actions countered the efforts to maintain her image as the ideal mother and businesswoman. It was then that her lacking maternal instincts, need to streamline all aspects of her life, and desire to present as "the complete package" culminated in a sharp shift of care.

Overnight I found myself with investigators questioning my then 1-year relationship with my girlfriend, enrolled in a continuing education program, and, most upsetting, was no longer welcome in my Mother's home. I was told I would live with my father, a man I rarely saw, and around whom I felt utterly awkward. I pleaded my case through tears, a profound lack of understanding, and the immediate contradictory life changes being thrust at me. I begged my Mother with all of my being to allow me to stay with her—while questioning the sudden shift to my prior freedom. She, however, did not sway, remaining steadfast in her decision. Without raising her voice and while maintaining her professional

growing up right alongside me, three years younger. I started to realize that something was wrong when none of these incredibly high standards were being applied to him as he reached the same age milestones. The expectations they held for the two of us in adolescence were so starkly different, I couldn't understand it. I knew this was supposed to make me feel "special" and "precious" to God, like I was told by my Spice Girls Interventionist, but it didn't feel that way at all.	"fatherly" demeanor, she stated the facts: this was happening, and I had no say in the matter. Shortly after, while living with my Father and Stepmother 10 minutes away from Mother's apartment, she announced that she, my older sister (18), and my younger brother were moving to Texas. I cannot recall if I was invited to join them, but I did not. Instead, I remained in California until after my 18th birthday.

Through each step along the path of mothering, we stumble away and (in)to each other as fellow mother academics. As our manifestations fail to adhere to guidebooks we once held, the radical, often uncomfortable transformation from audacious confidence to cautious scrutiny unites us in the daily struggle against and toward enlightened incompetence. For many, the implicit expectation and sometimes explicit demand to be present on Zoom with "cameras on" manifested a world for working and learning in which the etiquettes of "professionalism" are often mutually exclusive and, thereby, exclusionary. Whether due to repetitive quarantining after exposure to COVID-19, concerns about potential exposure, or simply an inability to find and afford suitable childcare, many working parents find themselves with children hemmed just outside of the virtual frame. With an expectation to remain visible, is it more professional to change a diaper, breastfeed a baby, or help a child navigate their virtual-school experience on-screen or to turn the camera off? If neither is permissible, the expectation must be that those, like ourselves, who care for children are not welcome to participate in working and learning at all.

Elaborating on Husserl's (1970) metaphor of the writing-table through a personal anecdote, Sarah Ahmed (2006) shares the frustrating impossibility of writing when children are present to illustrate the political economy of attention, wherein an uneven distribution of attention-time significantly affects who has the opportunity to write at all, as well as the objects of writing and time available for writing. Meaning that "for some, having time for writing, which means time to face the objects on which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available, given the ongoing labor of other attachments" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 547). In examining the process by which attention is distributed and particular orientations are achieved, Ahmed (2006) proposes a queer phenomenology that "faces the back" or "looks behind phenomenology" (p. 549). This queering directs attention away from the objects of the "world as it is given" or the "world which I am in" and toward "what that is around"—the objects that are relegated to the periphery, but which nevertheless are necessary for the "world which I am in" to exist (Ahmed, 2006, p. 545).

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us suddenly became isolated, while others lost any refuge of time or space we once had for ourselves (Krueger, 2021). In this sense, various forms of personal and professional exposures are imposed on each of us: Zoom meetings at home, caring for children during work hours, disclosing underlying medical conditions and family circumstances to colleagues, asking our supervisors for accommodations, and many more. Conversely, some remain insulated from these

exposures almost entirely, capable of meticulously arranging their time, personal appearances, and work environments in ways that feel most presentable.

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In planning for our growing family, my husband and I set aside funds to pay for full-time daycare—the full amount of my Graduate Assistantship stipend—and moved closer to both of our parents to open possibilities for the support I would need to attend evening classes, when childcare is otherwise unavailable. My second child was born in April of 2020, right at the onset of the two week shut-down intended to "flatten the curve." Suddenly, our daycare (at no reduction in cost, to retain staff) was frequently and unpredictably closed for 10 days at a time, and with a newborn and toddler at home, my plans to rely on grandparents, all designated at high-risk of death from the virus, were entirely void.	At the onset of COVID-19, I found myself at home with my two school-aged sons. As I worked to home-school them and complete the final semester of my Ph.D. coursework, I experienced a split between the professional academic life I had spent years building for myself and the ever-growing needs of my children, their schooling, and our overall social emotional well-being. How was I to "have it all" when I didn't have the time or support to attend to my most basic care? It was then that I experienced the shattering of my idealistic history and perceptions of motherhood with that of my reality/life as a mother.
We were mothers and graduate students before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was at this point that the disconnect between who we hoped to be as working mothers in academia diverged in insurmountable opposition with who we needed to be for our children, spouses, families, and even society as a whole. With no choice but to either abandon our academic endeavors to stay at home without any prospects for even our financial independence, much less intellectual fulfillment, or to fully integrate our mothering itself into our academic pursuits, we leaned heavily on each other for what support we could find to share, but we largely just engaged in a wide variety of unsustainable practices of placing ourselves last and neglecting our own basic needs. This has put our lives ever more starkly at odds with the feminist and de/anti-colonial ethic of our own work and continues to raise both ethical and practical questions about the aporia of our willingness to be complicit in our own exploitation for the sake of maintaining some representation on behalf of the institution that marginalized populations can ever expect to be given the support to succeed, or even the opportunity to "belong" in academia.	

The presence or absence of exposures serve important purposes throughout professional endeavors, causing either great ascendance or harm. These exposures vary by individual, reducing autonomy, increasing one's privacy, or shaping perceptions of equivalent exposures as either unprofessional or endearingly relatable per hierarchical and heteropatriarchal norms (Crenshaw, 1990). The image many of us have the privilege to project for the world through technological distance is achieved with utmost intention, designed to display only what we decide. However, often directly out of frame, and unavoidably visible for many, is the beautiful chaos of life. Although we are proud of all we have accomplished for ourselves and our families while subjected to these mutually-exclusive expectations and onto-epistemologically violent learning environments, we wonder what we have lost in the process. What could we have done, in our studies or for ourselves, had we not been bombarded with demands to place our "care" elsewhere?

Conjuring Our Utopia

The second step of *currere*, known as the progressive step, asks us to look freely into the future toward what has yet to happen. This step welcomes a free association of imagination to construct a utopian future to be present in the past, wherein we are not who we are in this present moment, we feel what will be missing, we know what we are seeking, and we see who we wish to be. A palimpsest of the self, inspired by *currere*, asserts that the past is now and the now is present, integrates a greater understanding of our present selves by envisioning a future utopia of mothering. The future is not already not yet, but rather, it already was. Understanding this process constructs the future, and as such, we must ask: What elements of the present will(not) sustain us tomorrow? In answering this question, there are quite a few embarrassingly obvious places to start. For example, in the provision of childcare for students and faculty who must attend or facilitate classes, which for graduate students occur often at night when daycares and schools are closed and when younger children and babies should be sleeping.

Without imaginative constraints or pragmatic burdens, we cultivate a future wherein equity ensures a collective balance of the self throughout individual pursuits of livelihood and joy—leaning into love by choosing to cultivate the self, whether through an academic venture, ambitious career, spiritual journey, or creative expression, which does not conflict with parenting. In this fantasized tomorrow, we are free to be ourselves and to follow the joys and interests that led us to academia. Our future selves do not question the reality of this freedom, nor do we calculate its value in terms of what it can produce for consumption or material wealth, for we already know, and perhaps have always known, that life is meant to be explored and enjoyed. We enjoy the mundane and the exciting responsibilities of parenting rather than scrutinizing possible failures, because we approach this as we approach all things—collectively, with contributions toward child-rearing having little to do with biological relationships or one's ability to procreate. We cultivate a life that allows us to love, parent, read, question, write, and teach with passion, gratitude, and joy.

Imposed Panopticon

The analytical stage, or third step, of *currere*, encourages examination of the past and future. Through this process, we gain an understanding of our past curricula and knowledge of mothering. By theoretically bracketing the past and the future, we allow space for subjective freedom wherein we might inquire about the temporal complexity of the current moment. We assert that mothering is a form of learned curriculum that we reinforce as parents and scholars.

Foucault's (1975/2007) *Discipline and Punish* describes Bentham's Panopticon prison, in which the behaviors of all inmates are controlled, not by the more traditional physically coercive tactics—impenetrable dungeon walls, chains, bars, locks, and heavily armed guardsmen—but rather by the psychological coercion accomplished via the complete visibility of each isolated individual. Great care is taken to ensure that no prisoner can ever know for certain whether or not he (or they) is (or are) being observed by administrators at any given moment, provoking paranoia that initiates self-monitoring, making guardsmen unnecessary. For some, the immediate shift to distance learning and teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic delineated a sense of employment freedom and untold possibilities to attend to their presumably neglected home lives. The illusions of such freedom, however, insidiously subverted and demanded an always perfect and always available employee.

Adding to these newly inequitable and exclusionary practices, as mothers, we were already struggling with an inability to separate our personal and professional lives.

From pumping breast milk in a public bathroom stall during a ten-minute class break to bringing children along when childcare falls through, we attempted the balancing act of always meeting our children's needs while minimizing their capacity for disruption. For many academics, who, by the standards of academia, are labeled Other, expectations to separate the personal self and the professional self have proven increasingly impossible amid the pandemic.

These experiences reinforce that as academics our roles as mothers are burdensome, something to negate or work around rather than something entirely compatible with, and even of great import to, academia. As scholars of education, this disconnect resonates especially deeply, as children, adolescents, and the developmental processes that impact them are the subjects of our studies. There is a very real risk inherent in this paradox that situates the resentment that builds to resist our circumstances either toward our own children or toward our academic pursuits. Designed to highlight and value specific ways of knowing and being, academic spaces exist and are reified by original design. Thus, the academy is little more than a curricular machine, attending to itself to maintain its own exclusionary criteria. The interrogation of mothering as a curriculum, similar to Patti Lather's (2012) concept of a "double(d) movement that uses and troubles a category simultaneously" (p. 73), makes way for "something else to come about" (p. 7). When we juxtapose the conflicts of mothering and curriculum in this way, they complicate one another by impairing and fracturing inherent expectations and ways of knowing. This disconnect positions our curriculum as mothers against our curriculum for mothering.

Fragile Fortitude

In the synthetical step of *currere*, we tune in acutely to our historical inner voice as we inquire about the present moment. In doing so, we encourage self-mobilization by attending to a public pedagogy of mothering. Opportunities to subjectively reexperience understandings of the past and present and the significance they have on us as mothers and academics reflected undeniable fortitude and fragility. In this space, we witness each other and ourselves bravely transforming, evolving, and emerging into stranger-selves we have yet to meet. Arguably more noticeable than our presumed ideal colleagues, we, as outlier Others, fail to fit not only the academic ideals imposed on us, but also our own superhuman expectations for ourselves, which we would try not to impose upon others. We contend, however, that radical counter-hegemonic academics, those who fail, or refuse, to meet limited expectations of professionalism or endless availability might apply a queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006) to challenge these professional exposures. The mothers of academia who demand to be seen and cared for with the same tenderness we afford to others must adopt a collective plan of resistance.

We must understand the relationship(s) between our exploitation as women, the curriculum of mothering, and our academic overexposure and exclusion as meticulously designed and maintained. Further, we must interrogate whether or not our heroic efforts to uphold our commitments to our families, our selves, and our intellectual purposes in institutions that only welcome the childless may implicate us as complicit in perpetuating our ongoing marginalization. In looking toward the transformative possibilities of fugitive forms of study, Leigh Patel (2021) recalls that, when W.E.B. Du Bois was once congratulated for being the first African American to earn three graduate degrees from Harvard, including a Ph.D., he famously responded, "The honor, I assure you, was Harvard's." Patel urges us to define ourselves by our relationships rather than our institutional affiliations and reminds us that, in a world where study is everywhere, "refusal opens space for the otherwise" (p. 161).

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