

Invisible Laborers: A storied love letter to other working-class mothers in academia

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Abstract

This paper began from my own desire to see the words of other working-class mothers in academia, to find the proof of our existence. I use autoethnography, or scholarly personal narrative, to nest my own stories of being a working-class mother within earlier scholars' (Leeb, 2004) observations of the particular ways classism targets working-class women in academia. I also draw from Tiffe's (2014) observations of the strengths of working-class people, in our abilities to disrupt the neoliberal university's relationships to time, care, and bodies, and consider how working-class mothers in academia enact these disruptions through our presence.

Keywords

Working-class academic, social class, autoethnography, mothering, feminist

Dear readers,

In the summer of 2022, seven months after giving birth to my youngest child, I went searching for the evidence of our collective existence, for the words and stories of other working-class mothers in academia. My youngest is the ninth child I have mothered¹, but the first to come from my body. Despite the fact that I have been mothering – through kinship care, fostering, and adoption -- for more than two decades, becoming a mother by birth has led many people to see me as a 'new mother.' From all outside appearances, bringing her into the world as a 44-year-old assistant professor was one of the most middle-class things I have done. But in becoming a mother again, in a moment when both childcare (Haspel, 2022) and infant formula (Rosenberg, 2022) are in short supply in the United States, I've experienced a visceral reminder of our shared vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are inextricably linked to my class background. That is, in becoming a mother again, I am reminded that I am a working-class person in a middle-class institution that – at best – embraces the fiction that I can or should want to shed my working-class background. And that is only at its very best.

Mother has always been part of my identity in academia: as a non-traditional student and Pell-grant recipient mothering teens, as a grad student who attempted to feed her family with food

¹ Here I am echoing Garbes' (2022) construction of mothering as actions of care for others that are life-affirming and sustaining, and her rejection of the limiting heteropatriarchal ideal of mothering as a private investment in one's biological and legal children.

While mothering is deeply gendered, people of all genders can mother.

stamps, and as a contingent instructor who became a grandmother at 36. Now, from the relatively privileged perspective of a tenure-track position, mothering again elevates my awareness of my race, gender, and class – but particularly my class. I am aware of some of the ways whiteness affords me a buffer for the demanding labor of pregnancy and mothering that my BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) colleagues do not receive. I’m also aware of the increasing salience of my gender presentation, as my swelling belly drew comments in the hallways and colleagues coo over my youngest child. I can share some experiences of mothering with colleagues: we have developed a shorthand and sense of solidarity in the importance of mothering and the difficulty of balancing it with academic work. But it is the renewed resonance of my identity as a working-class mother that threatens to unmoor me: who will I speak to as a working-class mother in academia? My presence has already felt tenuous as a working-class academic. My degrees have afforded me some of the privileges of a middle-class life. Mothering again is a powerful reminder, though, that even with these degrees I am conditionally accepted in a space that was not created for me or people like me. Leeb (2004) explained:

It is precisely the bodies of women who are the first generation to enter higher education who are of specific interest, for they pose a threat to academic/middle-class subjectivity. They are the ones who have yet to be disciplined into conforming to what is expected from an academic/middle-class subject (pp. 18-19).

Mothering again makes my body resist discipline, become unruly. Mothering reveals – for me and for others – deeply ingrained beliefs, values, and dispositions that I received in the wordless ‘psychological flow from mother to child’ (S. Linkon, personal communication, June 2021). Mothering again exposes me. It touches all my insecurities and underscores fears of failure, of falling from the place I fought so hard to reach.

And yet, while the evidence of our collective existence is slim and the social supports for *all* mothers in academia are lacking (Gonçalves, 2019), I believe working-class mothers have something to offer academia. Tiffe (2014) argued that working-class academics have the potential to disrupt the neoliberal university’s relationships to time, care, and bodies. Mothering exists at the nexus of these three things. If we are to have a *true* reimagining of universities that persist in othering and marginalizing working-class academics (Lee, 2017) and students (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021; Langhout et al., 2009; Lehmann, 2014), the stories of working-class mothers in academia are essential.

Becoming invisible: The erasure of working-class labor and mothering in academia

Like many working-class academics, I have sought community in the collected stories of other working-class academics² (Dews & Law, 1995; Hurst & Nenga, 2016; Ryan & Sackrey, 1996; Tomarcyzk & Fay, 1993; Van Galen & Sablan, 2021). Their stories are a salve I apply to heal wounds that are so numerous I fear I will spend the rest of my life learning to articulate the pain. Warnock (2016) summarized themes across several of these works: alienation, classist microaggressions, impostor syndrome, ‘passing’ as middle-class, and for those of us who entered

² I’m aware that some of these collections focus on first-generation status rather than working-class identification among the authors. Because our discourse around social class is so muddled in the United States, I’ve included these collections too, given the significant overlap between working-class and first-generation students.

academia more recently, the burden of student debt and increasing precarity of contingent labor. She also captured the emotional weight of these writings: many of us read them through tears.

When I turn to these volumes, the mentions of mothering are limited (Bond, 2021; Díaz Martín & García, 2021), and what I do find often speaks to the erasure common among all working-class academics. Laura Harris (2002) wrote about the solidarity of welfare mothers in her graduate program, and the deliberate obfuscation of this part of her identity when she transitioned from being a student to an academic:

My identity as a welfare queen is consistently rendered illegible in the academy...While the academy identifies me as a lesbian woman of color and is often eager to do so, it remains a troubled identifying coupled with my lived experience as a welfare recipient that frequently impacts my subjectivity in the academy's halls (p. 373)

Harris's (2002) race and gender are central to her identity as a welfare queen. These elements of her identity are *seen*, along with her sexual orientation, and even welcomed. But the erasure of her identity as a welfare queen is also a denial of her classed experiences as a welfare recipient. For those of us who are working-class, there is a stronger connection, and often lived experiences that betray the intimate associations between mothering, working-class life, and poverty. Another working-class scholar shared her experiences of sitting with her sister, who was becoming a mother, 'locked in the molded plastic chairs of Adult and Family Services' (Garrison, 2002, p. 471). Importantly, Garrison (2002) noted the distance between her experiences as a graduate student and the waiting room of the local welfare office she had come to know as 'a room mothers sit in' (p. 471).

I am grateful for these traces, for scraps of evidence that it is possible to mother and be working-class in academia. But I want more. Our erasure is a violence. In its place are the 'lying myths and easy moralities,' (Allison, 2001, p. 86) that perpetuate incomplete narratives about *all* working-class academics: the tales of social mobility, exceptionalism, of grit and resilience. The silence flattens us; it makes those of us who are here wonder if we are alone. In these pages I will write with the words of other working-class academics, including some who speak of mothering. And to the silence, I will add my stories.

Telling (y)our stories: Working-class mothering and a concept of the future

'[I] tell these stories because [I] believe they do something in the world to create a little knowledge, a little humanity, a little room to live and move in and around the constraints and heartbreaks of culture and categories, identities, and ideologies' (Adams & Jones, 2011, p. 109)

Although scholarly personal narratives are the signature method of working-class studies, the stories we tell about working-class people are often too narrow (S. Linkon, personal communication, June 2021). Working-class people are routinely constructed within the archetypes that spring from an impoverished imagination of what constitutes working-class: white people, almost always men, impacted by de-industrialization. This is particularly true in the United States, in which classism is one of the 'distortions of difference' (Lorde, 1980/2007, p. 115) which is least understood. Defining class becomes a struggle, even for those of us who learn class lessons that

linger in our bodies: the fear of hunger that sets my mind on edge several times a day, the resistance to calling in sick that arises when I wake with a raging fever, or the anxiety that grips me when my car needs an expensive repair. My students also struggle to articulate this aspect of their identities, and to them I offer hooks' (2000) use of Rita Mae Brown's words:

Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience (determined by your class) validates those assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act (pp. 3-4).

When I share these words with my students, I often invite them to think back to their experiences in high school and their dreams for their lives. Our concepts of a future are often reflected in our plans, our dreams, about life after high school.

June 1995

On a warm spring evening I joined my high school classmates one last time, walking across our football field while the younger members of the school band played 'Pomp and Circumstance' on an endless loop, guiding us to our chairs. There were ninety of us in my graduating class, and most of us had known each other from kindergarten. In eighth grade, two of my classmates became pregnant, and in each year that followed, a few more became mothers. By the time we reached graduation, nine of us were already mothers, or were pregnant and had decided to mother their children.

Graduation was the culmination of several years spent nurturing dreams of college amidst the realities of a working-class teenaged life. After taking the SATs, my mailbox filled with glossy brochures from colleges and universities across the country. I collected them in a fat stack that I tucked inside a drawer in my desk. Occasionally I would fan them out and dream about sitting in lecture halls, reading in beautiful, old libraries, or studying at a cramped desk in my dorm room. I crossed the stage at my graduation as one of the 'top ten' students, those with the highest grade point averages (GPA). I was proud to be among these classmates – all of us women – who had finally made it acceptable to be smart and female. But I was too embarrassed to reveal that I was the only one without college plans, a detail that was announced with our names, scholarships awarded, and GPAs. When the principal read my name, GPA, and listed the scholarships I'd received, and told the crowd I was planning to go to the local community college, I blushed with shame at my lie. I had not given up hope, though, that I would get there someday.

As a young person, I might have been challenged to explain my basic assumptions about life or my concept of a future. But on that soft June evening, I walked away from my education with a lesson our teachers probably never intended: to be gendered as feminine in my community was almost synonymous with motherhood. Those of us like me who did not become birth mothers by our early 20s worked in occupations approximating motherhood: as child care workers, early childhood educators, personal care workers, and nannies. College was a possibility I never let go of, but I always knew it was *just* a possibility. Motherhood, on the other hand, was something I knew to be inescapable. In a society where mothering and the work it entails are dismissed and

devalued, and particularly for working-class mothers, I learned quickly that my work and my worth were always in question.

As a result, like many working-class people, I have no access to intergenerational wealth. Stories are my cultural inheritance. Even my somewhat remarkable social mobility is not enough to guarantee I will be able to pass on much of material value to my children. My chances at amassing wealth grow slimmer with every year I pay student loans, watching the balances remain stable or – more often -- grow with compounding interest. While I hope to leave my children something of monetary value that will buffer them against the cruel indifference capitalism directs towards working-class people, stories are the only thing I can promise. I offer my words here for other working-class mothers in academia: proof of our existence, historical traces that will encourage those who follow in our footsteps. Stories can heal, can help us articulate who we are in the midst of erasure, and perhaps most importantly, provide evidence that we are not alone.

Disrupting time: A working-class mother enters academia

An educational system constructs a timeline for ‘scholastic age,’ namely, the age a student is expected to be at a certain stage in an educational trajectory. Working-class students are the most likely to deviate from the scholastic age (Arner, 2014, para. 18)

As Arner (2014) goes on to explain, the timeline for scholastic age reflects a middle-class educational trajectory, with immediate enrollment in a four-year university following high school graduation and the completion of a degree without significant gaps³ or pauses. Younger graduate students, and consequently younger applicants for academic positions, are associated with precocity, and greater intellectual potential. Working-class mothers in the United States, by virtue of living in a society with little to no social supports for mothering (i.e., paid parental leave, childcare assistance, universal health care, and/or child allowances), often enter university as non-traditional, older students. Unfortunately, older students are not always viewed with the same promise, the same assumption of potential, as students who have completed education at the ‘right’ pace.

September 2008

My first academic job is a work-study position my professor has fashioned into a research assistantship. Every Thursday I sit in his office, and while the sun slants low through the windows, we discuss my work for the week: reading articles, crafting literature reviews, and editing a manuscript. It is work that doesn't feel like work, and after years spent in a busy restaurant and perpetually underfunded early childhood classrooms, I am amazed one can have work like this. I start to grow comfortable in the space, to love the cool, quiet hallways, the small kitchen and fully stocked work room, the soft chair where I sit each week. One week my task is – quite unbelievably – to write about a moment of epiphany (Denzin, 1989). After a year at university, I've finally begun to believe what my professors have told me: a graduate degree is a possibility for me, a 30-year-old mother of teenagers. Like every assignment, I agonize over each word, typing it on an old

³ An exception to this rule could be gap years. But these – at least in my experience – also seem to be solely the province of middle-class students and families.

desktop computer tucked in the corner closet of our living room, balancing the keyboard on my lap.

When I meet with my professor to discuss my writing, his reaction surprises me. The usual look of approval is replaced by bewilderment. I have written about my experiences mothering (fostering, adopting, and providing kinship⁴ care to eight young people in my family) and how these experiences have led me to research questions about what happens after foster care, about aging out. As we talk, I realize it's not the style of my writing that has unsettled my professor, but the details of the story.

'So, you allowed this young person to stay in your home?' he asks.

'Yes. I couldn't take him to the men's shelter. He was only 19.'

'And he was a friend of your cousin? I'm just surprised...'

When he shifts his glasses down on the bridge of his nose, my professor bears the slightest resemblance to my uncle, who spends his days repairing buses for public transit. I create these connections to my family almost subconsciously, as points of familiarity that might help me remain in a place that is at once both strange and inviting. Or perhaps I am the strange one, as I often find myself wondering why aspects of my life are so unexpected. I offer this:

'Yes, he was my cousin's best friend. And on paper, he is just my cousin. But you have to understand, my cousin spent a lot of time with my family while he was growing up...' I falter for a moment and consider the phrase that is in my heart: 'My cousin was the first person to call me mom.' But I worry it's too unfamiliar, too much to explain. Instead, I say, 'After his younger sister died, we helped my aunt care for him. So, when he said his friend needed help, I trusted him.'

He opens his eyes wider, in the look that I've come to recognize as humility, a willingness to always admit the unknown, a quality which made me trust his teaching. 'I didn't know any students here had these types of experiences.'

When I look back on this exchange, I know it was a compliment: my lived experiences with young people in foster care, and young people who had experienced addiction and the criminal legal system were an asset to our research. Even on a commuter campus where the average student age was 30, my experiences as a working-class mother marked me as different, unexpected.

When I enrolled in university as a mother of teens, and even more so when I pursued a graduate degree and became an academic, my story was easily co-opted into the myth of the exceptional student rising above her circumstance. I was evidence of the meritocratic possibilities of higher education. The fact that I was mothering at such a 'young' age and had done so much mothering already was treated as an anomaly, rather than the reflection of cultural beliefs that prize intimate partnerships and mothering alongside (rather than after) educational and career goals. I initially leaned into the narrative of exceptionality; indeed, I trusted it as the most realistic interpretation of my circumstances. Upon reflection, I realize how this surprise at my abilities and my experiences

⁴ This is a term I only learned in college. Prior to this, it was just considered caring for the young people in my family whose parents could not care for them, usually due to disability, poverty, and early death.

betrays the promise that academics may overlook in non-traditional students, particularly working-class mothers.

Now, from the semi-comfortable perspective of a tenure track position, I continue to offer these glimpses of mothering and my working-class identity as an attempt to prevent our erasure. I am here, and through holding tightly to my ancestors' patterns for mothering rather than middle-class benchmarks, I carry them into my work as an academic. For several years in the college classroom, I've offered a brief introduction on the first day of classes. I have a well-rehearsed blurb revealing some things about my identity as a working-class mother: 'I've been a kinship, foster, and adoptive parent to eight young people between the ages of 25 and 34.' This changed in November of 2020.

November 2020:

On Veteran's Day in 2020 my phone rings early in the morning. When I pick up, I'm surprised to hear my aunt's voice but her words settle into me as if I knew they were coming. There is no hesitation: she has just come from identifying my cousin's body. My brain hovers over our conversation and the rest of the details: his recent break up, how long his body lay there before anyone called for help, and the possibility of burying him in the spring, maybe on his sister's birthday, and maybe beside her grave.

Twenty years earlier, following his younger sister's death, my cousin's mother began sending him to stay with us: extended summer visits or to finish a particularly difficult term in school. My cousin was nine years younger than me, and he really was the first person who ever called me 'mom.'

My experiences as a mother appear non-traditional among largely middle-class academics. I have disrupted time through my 'early' entry into mothering roles. But my children's lives – and deaths – are also disruptive. In the first autumn of the COVID-19 pandemic, my cousin died the same way many others did, in the massive surge in lives lost to the opioid crisis (Cartus et al., 2022). As a working-class mother in academia, I have learned that too often our loved ones may come to embody, to give a face to the statistics of academics. To mother as a working-class person is to know that it is not just my timeline and concept of the future that will differ from my colleagues' sense of the future. It is also my children's futures that will likely differ dramatically. I wonder about the future my cousin imagined in his final moments, and his possible loneliness breaks my heart. Now every time I introduce myself to a new group of students, my oldest will always be 34.

Disrupted care: Working-class mothers and communal care

Working-class mothers in academia are likely to have come to motherhood earlier than our middle-class peers, but this timing is about more than a simple rejection of the middle-class timeline for mothering. It also reflects collective cultural values that drive many working-class people to engage in caretaking for our families and communities because, as Raechel Tiffe (2014) pointed out, we know that *no one else will* (emphasis in original, para. 24). I happened into motherhood after high school the same way my middle-class peers happened into college, by listening to the messages of those around me and responding to the needs in front of me.

February 2001

For the first few years I was providing kinship care, I was used to our teenaged family members calling me by my first name. I did the work of a mother, but could not take that title out of respect for the parents in our family who weren't able to do this work. My cousin was the first person to call me mother, and it began as a joke: he enjoyed the confused looks we got from people in the grocery store or the middle-aged women who staffed the front office at his high school.

'Mom' was a way he would tease me, but it was also a title I earned.⁵ I woke early in the dark mornings to cook breakfast while he packed his lunch. I drove him to the nursing home to visit his father, who had early-onset dementia. I sat beside him when he broke down crying on his sister's birthday, and listened to his stories: her favorite song, the Make-a-Wish trip to Disney World, and her final days, the hospital room quiet except for the hum of the ventilator and the nurses who tended her body as she died. In their last photo together, he lays beside her in her hospital bed, arms encircling her, his eyes staring directly into the camera. Beneath the beautiful dark fringe of lashes, her eyes had already taken on the distant, glassy look of her father, her aunt, and her grandfather, who all eventually succumbed to the same disease.

Caring for my cousin while his mother began grieving the death of his younger sister seemed to me to be the most natural thing in the world. Prior to becoming an academic, my entire adult life was spent caring for others in some form, both paid and unpaid. I babysat and waitressed as a teen and seamlessly moved into childcare, early childhood education, and personal care work before becoming a mother several times over. I sometimes wonder where I learned to give care, and find answers in my earliest memories: watching my mother join the elder women in her family in caring for her grandmother. They cooked meals and fed her, steadied her hands while she worked on a puzzle, and witnessed the slow progression of Alzheimer's as she was increasingly confined to her bed. My memories of these times are pleasant. I learned that to grow up was to care and give care to others.

In becoming a mother again, I've been confronted with the carelessness directed not only towards my children but towards all children in our culture. While my lived experiences and scholarship had taught me about the crisis in caregiving in the United States, living through it with an infant during a pandemic has only amplified the barriers to working-class mothers securing the child care necessary to pursue an academic career. Like Olsen (1956), the images of my youngest child's short stint in her first child care are 'curdled into my memory' (p. 2)

March 2022

When we step into the infant classroom, we are greeted by the cries of two of the three infants sitting on the classroom rug, one with mucus stretching from his nose to his chin. The classroom teacher is doing her best, trying to orient us amidst the cries. The director who pops in briefly ignores the upstretched arms of the crying boys. During my daughter's three hours of 'trying out' care, I move as quickly as possible to get errands done, my phone buzzing with notifications. 'C.

⁵ When you mother as a foster parent or adoptive parent or kinship caregiver, it's important to understand that you may need to earn the title of 'mother.' It may take years or may never happen. This is part of what makes this labor invisible.

began her nap at 10:20.’ ‘C. woke up at 10:40.’ ‘C. drank 2 oz. of her bottle.’ ‘C. is a happy girl!’ At ten weeks old, my daughter is too young to join the sitting infants on the rug. In the accompanying photo she sits in the teacher’s lap, her body arched and face twisted upwards in a grimace. When I pick her up, the director informs me that the center is going ‘masks-optional’ the next week, following the governor’s recent announcement (VanderHart, 2022). After a weekend spent weighing the potential risks of a COVID infection and scrambling to come up with alternative care arrangements, I withdraw her on Monday.

I have thought back to this scenario again and again in the ensuing months. I wonder if I made a mistake, turning away a child care placement and plunging my family into months spent patching together childcare plans that fell through more often than they worked out. I remember my own years spent working in childcare, and the difficult work of soothing young children. When we withdrew our daughter, I told the director we were concerned about masking, and we were. But the truth was, I was not ready to surrender my child to the care of people who might behave carelessly with her.

Disruptive bodies: Working-class mothers in academia and embodied labor

...according to Plato ‘manifold and complex pleasures and desires and pains are generally found in children and women and servants, and in the freemen so-called who are of the lowest and more numerous class’ ...the production of the clear thinking male philosopher mind, far removed of the body, is based on the production of the female and the laboring class as the body, expressed in their ‘manifold and complex pleasures and desires and pains’ (Leeb, 2004, p. 41).

Leeb (2004) traced the academic tendency to link working-class people, and particularly women, with bodies and physical labor, and the subsequent devaluation of that labor, to the earliest Greek philosophers. The working-class mother troubles academia through her presence, by performing labor that is always already embodied. Like all mothering, the labor of working-class mothers in academia requires a giving of one’s body (Garbes, 2022).

June 2022

After three and a half months back at work, I am attending my first academic conference since giving birth. My sister agrees to accompany me to provide child care while I present. She tries, but cannot get out of the extra shift she’d agreed to: the rural hospital where she works as a nurse is still overwhelmed with the fallout from COVID-19. We arrive at the conference hotel just before midnight. After puzzling over the travel crib I have never collapsed and reassembled, nursing, and settling my daughter back to bed, I lie quietly, willing sleep to come. I am startled awake sometime in the early hours of the morning, and, still half-asleep, check my daughter to ensure she is still breathing. Like my sister, she is sleeping peacefully. My body cannot seem to settle in a new place.

The next day I linger after my conference session for a conversation over coffee, encouraged by my sister, whose ease with my daughter is welcome respite. That afternoon my breasts fill with milk I cannot express, and the clogged ducts harden like knotted ropes. For the next two days my chest radiates with pain that extends out to my armpits, and holding my daughter is excruciating.

It's not surprising that the few working-class scholars who write of the activities of mothering mention breastfeeding (Bond, 2021; Díaz Martín & García, 2021), with Olsen (1956) daring to mention the physical discomfort of 'my breasts ach[ing] with swollenness' (p. 2). Traveling even a few hours from home with my daughter demanded a carefully executed plan to ensure not only that she would have a regular source of food but that my body would not betray me. I have grown to know this pain intimately in the first year of my youngest child's life. As hard as I try to enact the disembodied academic subject toiling away at the keyboard, the physical demands of feeding my youngest child make this impossible. I consider stopping breastfeeding many times, but the store shelves have been emptied or near-emptied of infant formula for months⁶. I can't stomach the thought of buying formula that someone else needs to feed their child if I can make food from my own body.

August 2022

Aside from her dark, abundant hair, my daughter's hands are the feature that people comment on most frequently. They remind me of little golden starfish, each long, delicate finger punctuated by a tiny dimple at its base. They are my hands, but they are not. These days, it seems my hands are aging faster than any other part of my body. In between the diapers and preparing bottles, the washing is wearing down skin I began to neglect as a 16-year-old waitress, plunging my hands into scalding-hot buckets of bleach water to sanitize the rags we'd use to wipe up after customers. My hands are perpetually thirsty, and recently they've begun to burn and itch from frequent washing.

These hands wiped noses and comforted embarrassed children in hushed tones when they wet their pants in the child care classroom. These hands steadied an elder with early-onset dementia, spoon-feeding, and brushing hair. When her dementia progressed, these hands helped with the most intimate tasks: shaving, cleaning up after using the bathroom, changing soiled clothing, and bathing.

It is difficult for me to untangle the relationship between care and embodied labor: working-class mothering has marked my body. My hands resemble the hands of my ancestors, something that brings with it physical pain and discomfort and also a sense of pride. These are hands marked by decades of caregiving for young and old bodies, for disabled and dying bodies. I study my daughter's hands as she learns to use them, as she studies them. My work as an academic might protect her hands from the effects of this labor, from the pains of caring for other's bodies. But I hope she will also know the desires and pleasures of the embodied labor of care work: of the brevity of our time here together on this planet, and our remarkable and inescapable interdependence.

Reclaiming body consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2002) and claiming our existence

Academics...write about people like me, like us, as objects of study. Yet, they will never understand people like me, like us; neither would they fully accept my working-classness

⁶ As I complete this manuscript in late October of 2022, there is still a shortage of infant formula in the United States.

when I was in the role of academic. To do so would mean the object of study has become the subject, thus the status quo would be threatened...instead, what happened was either I was invisible, not seen, I didn't exist... (Tugwell, 2022, p. 44)

I began this letter as a testament to the presence of working-class mothers in academia, after searching and finding scant evidence of our existence. The very qualities that shape my mothering as a working-class person, my orientation to time and the embodied labor of caregiving, render me an ill fit for academic work (at least as it is currently imagined). I have spent many hours trying to disembody myself, to prize the efficient use of time, to offer my best imitation of the 'clear thinking male philosopher mind' (Leeb, 2004, p. 41). Mothering again reminds me why I so often fail in these attempts. In writing this letter, I am attempting a new response, a reclaiming of the embodied labor of caregiving, and the time that it takes. I am reminding myself of the existence of working-class mothering in academia, and especially, it's value. Our value, that is.

October 2022

On the days when I've grown numb at my desk, and my mind swirls with the fears of my inabilities, I remember Anzaldúa's (2002) words: 'To reclaim body consciousness tienes que moverte – go for walks, salir a conocer mundo, engage with the world' (p. 553).

After bundling my daughter in her coat and hat and snuggling her into a carrier strapped to my chest, I step onto the forested path in the park near my home. She cranes her neck upward and studies the trees, their green tops slowly thinning, revealing the clouds above. After a few minutes of walking, the rhythm of my steps lulls her to sleep. Under the trees my head begins to clear. I am surprised by the ways my cousin has emerged in the process of writing these words: his life and his death, and his recognition of my work as a mother. It's been nearly two years grieving the death of a young person that feels both unspeakable and unintelligible in middle-class academia. As I walk, I am reminded of the value of being one of the few working-class scholars in academia: for the students who need to see themselves, and for the research that needs the perspectives of working-class people, and particularly working-class mothers.

While they are difficult to find, I believe there are more – and perhaps many, many more – stories of working-class mothering in academia. Mine are by no means representative of the whole. But it's precisely because there are so many stories that are silenced – through fear, doubt, shame, and the simple fact of exhaustion -- that I have begun this telling. There are so many stories left to tell.

With love,

Miranda

Author Bio

Miranda Mosier-Puentes is an assistant professor in Child, Youth, and Family Studies at Portland State University, in Portland, Oregon. Her research and teaching focus on the experiences of other

working-class and/or first-generation college students navigating higher education institutions that were not made by or for us.

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