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Misreadings and Misattributions: Care Labor and Control

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Misreadings and Misattributions: Care Labor and Control

Cover Page Footnote

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My partner and I call them "guilt albatrosses." We use this shorthand for objects that remind me of my failures and shortcomings. They assume myriad shapes. Uneaten cookies my mom made for the long car ride across the states separating our respective houses. A handmade gift from a friend intended to mark a special life event but never used for that occasion. Items of clothing I bought and loved before I learned of the designer's politics. These albatrosses can never be discarded so our house is littered with them. We cart the gifts and the clothes and the other albatrosses from residence to residence, and the cookies, even more laden with guilt and meaning after my mom's death, may well live in our freezer forever.

By the fall of 2020, the bags of pumped milk were on the verge of becoming another albatross. Shortly after the baby was born, I began stockpiling milk, falling into a pattern: Feed, pump, clean, repeat. Stare at the clock at 2:37am, 3:48am, or 4:17am while calculating the remaining minutes separating me from my return to sleep. Even in my exhaustion, I understood the symbolic weight I was placing upon that milk and sensed that I was stockpiling it to serve my own purposes as much as (or perhaps more than) I was producing it for the baby. I thought of the milk as my part of a deal: I needed enough of it to meet our daycare center's requirements. The baby would enter care, and I would return to performing a different kind of labor. Independent of the complex and fraught cultural discourses circulating around various approaches to infant feeding,¹ the milk, to me, was a vehicle; it was a mechanism for accessing other things I desired deeply amid the all-consuming experience of new parenthood: the familiar feelings of self-efficacy, identity, and control messily entangled with my understandings of "my work."²

I dutifully filled the freezer. Some of the last bags were dated February 2020; we had almost enough for the baby to enter care the next month. March came and went. The coronavirus pandemic derailed our plans. The baby stayed at home, and the bags intended for the daycare sat there, aging, approaching their expiration date, and slowly but surely transforming into new albatrosses. Even as I recognized that this process was happening, I could not make sense of it: Of what failure or shortcoming were these albatrosses to remind me?

It was always a fragile arrangement, both within and beyond the confines of our house.³ The sheer amount of time and labor childcare demands was never lost upon me; I watched my mother bend her life around her two daughters. My anxiety about *who* would perform such labor (fearing the answer would be me) and *how* (given my attachments to my professional identity exactly as it existed pre-baby) forestalled all

serious conversations about children for years.⁴ Still, we were both lucky and privileged. We were able to welcome a child into our family. We found a daycare with a spot for the baby, and we prepared to trade in capitalism's most common currencies. We would exchange money for time. As in, "Here is our baby and our tuition. May I have the next 6-7 hours to work?"

This too-naked acknowledgement of the inextricable economic components of this kind of labor shorn from rhetorics of care, generosity, and other feminized virtues may sound crass. Be that as it may, discussions of caregiving (of any kind) that traffic predominantly in feminized virtues and excise economic value worry me. I fear a thin line separates the logic that the work of providing care is its own reward and the exploitative conclusion that such affective rewards supplant the need for more compensation and support. My concerns about the devaluation of this labor are not original; countless individuals have advanced similar arguments about the import "of," in Koa Beck's words, "recognizing domestic labor [and other forms of caregiving] as the critical work that [it] is" and valuing it as such, societally and monetarily.⁵

The coronavirus pandemic offered a deluge of evidence to support such arguments. Shortly after the stay-at-home orders were issued and schools and daycare centers closed in the spring of 2020, articles flooded the Internet highlighting the absurdity of pretending that caregiving is not a form of demanding labor.⁶ Authors and journalists documented their own experiences or profiled other families to illustrate the crushing weight of the demands upon "socially distanced" family units and the unsustainability of "business as usual" under such duress.⁷ Shifting the gaze from family units to systemic reverberations, others speculated about the broader ramifications of such an abrupt reconfiguration of care arrangements. Some postulated that, due to inadequate public support for childcare providers and loss of tuition revenue, numerous daycares may close permanently, winnowing the number of operational centers post-pandemic and rendering care even more inaccessible for some.⁸ Others argued that the pandemic will have untold adverse effects on women's roles in the workforce, given gendered inequities in the performance of care labor.⁹ And, of course, whatever the pandemic's gendered implications, the situation is compounded by racism, xenophobia, and other exclusionary ideologies. Early on, reports emerged of racial disparities in the pandemic's economic toll in addition to the death toll.¹⁰ Such data suggested that Black women and women of color experienced higher unemployment rates,¹¹ significant representation in fields prone to job losses,¹² and magnified reverberations associated with childcare closures.¹³ Moreover, women of color comprise a significant percentage (40-45%) of paid childcare providers;¹⁴ accordingly, they operate within an

industry dually imperiled as both their bodies and economic livelihoods are put at risk.

As the multi-faceted problems stemming from many Americans' devaluation of care labor garnered media attention during the pandemics,¹⁵ multiple rhetors seized the moment to recast the provision of care as a public policy issue.¹⁶ Advocating for the adoption of a new conceptual framework, Senator and former presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren positioned "childcare" as "infrastructure" akin to the "roads, bridges and communications systems [built and maintained] so that people can work."¹⁷ In her 2020 Democratic National Convention speech, Warren relayed her personal experience on the brink of dropping out of the workforce before being "saved" by her Aunt Bee, a family member willing to relocate to provide live-in childcare for Warren's family. Reflecting the awareness that "have an Aunt Bee" is not a viable childcare plan for all Americans, Warren's speech underscored the need for new policies to support working families.

Before the 2020 pandemics, I knew there was no "Aunt Bee" on her way, and the implications of that absence prompted numerous anxiety-ridden conversations and compulsive Internet searching. I approached conversations about growing our family as if they were a kind of narrative math problem ("Solve for X" where "X" is childcare).¹⁸ The axioms upon which this problem rested presumed a profoundly atomized approach to care labor, accepting as a *fait accompli* the absence of the supportive public infrastructure Warren and others have proposed. Accordingly, I reasoned that if my partner and I were to seek assistance with the many challenges that accompany raising a child, our options would be limited to: (1) Extended networks of family and friends. For a number of reasons including geographic distance, we could not count on these networks as a feasible or reliable childcare plan. (2) Paid care labor. Whether the brevity of this list was a byproduct of our failure of imagination, an inability to think in more expansive ways, a reflection of our life experiences and positionalities, an indication of the extent to which we have absorbed neoliberal ideologies,¹⁹ or an unwillingness to accept that we—like many families—may not be able to depend on any extra help with childcare demands (or likely a combination of all of the above), our list of options ended here. Paid care labor became our solution by default.

Although I believed in the value of our hypothetical child receiving care from others and being in community with other children at a daycare,²⁰ the patent thinness of such a highly individuated, market-based approach to providing families with support distressed me. Without yet having children or imagining the repercussions of a pandemic, I

nonetheless could foresee scenarios wherein our needs for help would outstrip the tidy business hours during which the center provides care and anticipate the pressure center closures would create, accepting that these unforeseen circumstances would arise even as we, like many others I suspected, had no back-up plan for handling them. And these contingencies were not the ones that most troubled me given the significant structural inequities staining the ways both access to and the provision of paid care labor operate in the United States. Reports detailing unaffordable price tags, "child-care deserts," and the untenable conditions under which many childcare providers labor illuminate some of the ways racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression interact to bar many individuals and families from receiving needed support.²¹ At the same time that I considered daycare to have some merits and accepted that it was the path we would take if we were to welcome a child into our family,²² I was not oblivious to the irony: The time paid childcare opened to perform the (relatively) safe and secure work I do, teaching and writing about meaning and power, would be enabled by my participation in a highly inequitable institution that reproduces class-based, racial, and gendered disparities and other forms of injustice.

Of course, decisions about the ways one might take on or offset caregiving responsibilities (to the extent that one has choice) are not exactly (or rather exclusively) math problems,²³ and the postulates I accepted communicated simultaneously too much and too little about my assumptions regarding labor, agency, and control. Like all metaphors, the rhetorical act of framing our conversations as "a math problem to be solved" both "distort[s]" and "illuminates" its subject.²⁴ Reducing the complex web of social, economic, political, and ideological relationships conditioning how, when, and which families and caregivers are supported into variables I supposed I could manipulate misunderstands the diffuse ways power and agency operate while bolstering an illusory sense of omnipotence, as if (in accordance with the ways I imagine someone solving a math problem) a solitary figure with a pencil could command all parts of the equation. Admittedly, this framing appeals to some of my sensibilities. It plays to a part of my ego that upholds a vision of myself as a diligent problem-solver and believes I can arrive at answers if I just throw enough time and effort at the quandary. As tempting as such an image may be, its echoes of meritocratic logic (i.e., "just add time and effort") immediately raise my alarms, signaling the ways this false notion of personal empowerment is intertwined with a host of toxic and discriminatory ideologies that undermine the very idea of effort as the determinant of success.

When I could make no progress using this line of reasoning, I turned to the Internet. Given my particular professional aspirations, I would enter into Google over and over again some combination of "writers and mothers" or "academics and mothers." Kaitlyn Greenidge's reflections on potential ways to live a life at the intersection of those two identities filled me with hope.²⁵ Like Greenidge, I was searching for models. I would read and reread Wikipedia entries for famous writers, looking for clues about their personal lives. Did they have children? If so, when? Between which books or other professional projects? I would construct a timeline in my mind, inserting children's birthdates into a writer's bibliography, trying to assess *exactly* how much time away from work these exemplars needed. Bluntly, this activity, too, was about control; I wanted a way to manage *all* the pieces (willfully trying to ignore the limits of my reach while self-aggrandizing in the process) in an attempt to check my apprehensions over childrearing in a society that cares little about care labor.²⁶

Amid this compulsive searching, I latched upon Lauren Sandler's controversial article, "The Secret to Being Both a Successful Writer and a Mother: Have Just One Kid." As the title alludes, Sandler, in a fashion akin to my own obsessive Wikipedia reading, attempts to reverse engineer a solution to the competing demands placed upon working parents. She lights upon the idea that the professional careers of "eminence[s]" such as Susan Sontag, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Walker may be attributed to their family size and posits that having one child may be the answer.²⁷ Sandler's piece elicited a firestorm, drawing sharp rebukes from critics questioning her logic and underscoring that, for many, family size is not a "choice" at all.²⁸ Multiple famous writers, including Zadie Smith and Ayelet Waldman, joined the fray, challenging the idea that motherhood cannibalizes creativity and reminding readers that the real obstacle to parents' professional success is lack of childcare.²⁹ Reflecting on this "debate," Rebecca Mead notes that Sandler's overarching error is a problem of misattribution.³⁰ In Sandler's writing, Mead highlights, the individual is the fulcrum point, a flaw I replicated in my own obsessive searching and egoistic efforts to plan, manage, and exert control. By centering the individual exclusively as the locus for *agency and action*, Sandler, in turn, risks positioning aspiring parents exclusively as the locus of *responsibility*, potentially absolving economic, political, and ideological systems of their role in shaping gendered and racialized relationships to labor (care-related or otherwise). In so doing, Sandler engages in an act of misdirection, training her readers' eyes to focus on individuals' constraints and preferences and away from the social structures that create no-win situations.

I suspect Sandler's piece resonated deeply with me because I am prone to similar lapses in my conceptions of power, agency, and control. On the one hand, I have spent a considerable portion of my professional life as an academic and critic contemplating the ways economic, political, and ideological structures profoundly condition the possible and shape individuals' and collectives' lived experiences. I gravitate toward theories and frameworks that attempt to understand human meaning-making and behavior by turning attention to the material and ideological conditions marking a given moment in time. On the other hand, I harbor a sense of "exemption" from such social and structural influences manifest as an inflated sense of agency and control. This mindset occasionally bears the guise of a kind of plucky "can-do[ism]"³¹ fueled by cliched self-talk ("where there is a will, there is a way"), but undergirding such platitudes lies an outsized sense of my power and reach. Undoubtedly, my whiteness (among other privileges) and inherited Puritanical beliefs about "willpower" and work constitute key components of the alchemy that gives rise to this ego-driven worldview.³² Yet, understanding that such a disposition reflects these larger ideological and material influences does not translate inherently into its antidote. Its faux empowering siren song retains an allure.³³

So, like Sandler, I misread and misdirect attention. When performing as a critic, I default to my most familiar and practiced ways of thinking. I can spend hours identifying examples of ideologies or other forms of structural influence at work in the world. I can bury myself in the scholarship on race, gender, and care labor; individualism, neoliberalism, and agency; motherhood, etc. I know the themes explored in this essay are not "new."³⁴ Rich work exists in varied disciplines within the academy and outside of it (see Anne Helen Petersen's *Culture Study*, for example) unpacking these constructs long before they appeared in headlines in 2020. Their voices illustrate how belief systems gain traction through their internalization.³⁵ And, already, some writers and scholars have used the metaphoric laboratory of societies reconfigured by 2020's pandemics to plumb such internalization in action, expressly documenting women's feelings of guilt and failure in response to caregiving demands.³⁶ Many others will follow, building knowledge and illuminating the complexity of beliefs and systemic influences molding the ways both "care" and "labor" are understood and enacted two decades into the twenty-first century.

And still, a certain slipperiness affects my cognition and perception. Academic exercise provides me no inoculation.³⁷ I sit at my desk ready to excoriate the politics that have led to this moment—the many injustices that conditioned it and the ones that may result from it—while unable to

retain any clarity of perspective as I seek to make sense of my own layered pandemic experiences. The privilege of being able to take unpaid leave during the stretch of pandemic time that encompassed my child's infancy, my mother's passing, and the aftermath of her death. And the suspicion that "stepping back" signaled a personal shortcoming.³⁸ The knowledge that my body was relatively safe as I stayed at home combined with the luxury of being able to keep the baby at home as well. And the sense that another part of myself felt acutely imperiled, the part of my ego that troublingly conflates certain kinds of work with self-worth. The economic security of a tenured position and a dual-income household.³⁹ And a resignation to the possibility that this time of limited (academic) productivity may have its own costs.⁴⁰ The self-awareness that several intersecting privileges have buffered me from many of the pandemics' most devastating effects.⁴¹ And the self-indictment that arises in response to all the ways I perceive that I have fallen short of my own internalized expectations for performance (as a parent, professor, community member, etc.) during the pandemics. My complicity in upholding multiple dangerous ideologies by subscribing to a distorted notion of individual agency. And the recognition that many of my internal, self-judgmental narratives borrow the vocabularies of the capitalist, racist, and gendered ideologies and institutional practices shaping how I have come to understand power, care, agency, labor, work, worth, identity, and control.

These systemic influences and ideologies come in and out of focus. At times, their imprints on my thoughts and actions are apparent; at other times, they evade my perception. This blurriness is its own object of curiosity, one illuminated through the prism of Zadie Smith's treatment of this kind of dissonance. In her essay, "Peonies," written during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, Smith reflects on her investment in control and considers how such attachments operate alongside her thoughts about resistance, submission, and writing. Considering the limitations the act of writing imposes, she ponders the potential for maintaining "flexib[ility] on the page" so as to make space to be "shamelessly self-forgiving and ever changing."⁴² Such flexibility would enable the accommodation of "the complex and ambivalent nature of 'submission,'"⁴³ of being *out* of control, and allow for the "odd combination of" conceptual lens, vantage points, and affective states one may inhabit simultaneously, differing—even contradictory—dispositions coming to the fore "from moment to moment."⁴⁴ Smith offers an appealing way of relating to some of the competing impulses animating this self-reflection, but as an object that enters my interior landscape, Smith's argument, too, is slippery; I cannot hold onto the argument or hold the space for it. More often than not, caught in the vice-grip, when I'm feeling the pressure of

systemic forces bearing down, I slip registers: I harbor a secret sense of shame, the flipside of an inflated sense of power.

In some ways, 2020 provided ample opportunities to retrain the eyes to "see" systemic influences on humans' lives.⁴⁵ Over the course of the year, an almost dizzying cascade of stories of loss—loss of life, livelihood, relationships, physical and mental health, the ability to meet basic human needs for survival, sustenance, and safety—coalesced into a damning indictment of systemic failures, highlighting the absence of sufficient social safety nets and revealing the dramatic inequities shaping community members' lived experiences.⁴⁶ In a year that included innumerable instances of anti-Black violence, including the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, racial justice advocates stressed the significance of attending to the profound ways anti-Black racism (alongside other discriminatory ideologies) courses through the institutions and social systems structuring the spaces within which life unfolds.

From the chorus of voices chronicling 2020's harms, a common sentiment emerges: The various social ills and public problems that filled the newspapers were never designed to rest on individuals' shoulders alone.⁴⁷ Against the backdrop of so many injustices, ideologies trumpeting the almighty power of the individual—including, as Beck notes, white feminism with its granular fixation on individual (read: white, privileged women's) success⁴⁸—proved to be almost comically bereft (or rather they would be comical if their results weren't so catastrophic).⁴⁹ As Petersen often phrases it, individuals cannot devise "hacks," implement simple shortcuts, to solve these problems.⁵⁰ "Gaming" family size is not the "work around" to resolve the nation's lack of investment in caregiving. Bags of frozen human milk cannot take the place of a national commitment to ensuring *all* individuals—independent of their caregiving responsibilities—are supported and positioned to thrive.⁵¹

Yet, as I stood in my kitchen, pouring bags of expired milk freighted with the tenuous optimism they once symbolized down the drain, I sensed vaguely that I missed something. Surely, there was something within my orbit of control, some way to ameliorate Ameliorate what exactly? I fumble and struggle to end that sentence. Like tugging on a loose thread, attempts to answer that question begin to unravel the very edifice of the thought. The pressures of caregiving demands? The lack of a larger care infrastructure? The ways the coronavirus pandemic's disruption of caregiving institutions refracts and perpetuates gendered and racist inequities? I missed some puzzle piece? I blink and know this feeling is absurd. I blink again and that knowing evaporates.

Notes

¹ For an example of the ways these discourses have been taken up in this journal, see Jessica Jorgenson Borchert, "A Narrative of Breastfeeding after a High-Risk Twin Pregnancy," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine* 4, no. 1 (2019): https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol4/iss1/20.

² For other mothers giving voice to similar or related sentiments regarding motherhood and identity or motherhood, work, and identity, see Sophie Gilbert, "Becoming a Parent During the Pandemic Was the Hardest Thing I've Ever Done," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/03/isolation-becoming-new-parent-during-pandemic/618244>; Kaitlyn Greenidge, "Open Mic for Two," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/31/parenting/new-mom-identity.html>; Anne Helen Petersen, "We're Just Beginning to Understand the Extent of Covid-19's Feminist Nightmare," Opinion, *MSNBC*, October 15, 2020, https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/we-re-just-beginning-understand-extent-covid-19-s-feminist-n1243401?icid=msd_topgrid.

³ As numerous voices have underscored, the problems surrounding the provision of childcare (for parents and providers) predate the 2020 pandemics. In an article in *Time*, author Elliot Haspel describes the situation as "so fragile that a stiff wind could have blown it over. Now we've got this hurricane [the coronavirus pandemic] that has completely shattered it." Abby Vesoulis, "How COVID-19 Has Created a Childcare Catch-22 for Working Families," *Time*, May 13, 2020, <https://time.com/5836309/coronavirus-childcare-working-families/>.

See also Kim Brooks, "Feminism Has Failed Women," Opinion, *The New York Times*, December 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/23/opinion/coronavirus-women-feminism.html>; Melinda Gates, "How Rethinking Caregiving Could Play a Crucial Role in Restarting the Economy," Opinions, *Washington Post*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/05/07/melinda-gates-how-rethinking-caregiving-could-play-crucial-role-restarting-economy/>; Melinda Gates, "This Pandemic Has Exposed Our Nation's Broken Caregiving System," Opinions, *Washington Post*, December 2, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/melinda-gates-broken-caregiving-system/2020/12/02/7codd9ae-34d1-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839_story.html; Steven Jessen-Howard and Simon Workman, "Coronavirus Pandemic Could Lead to Permanent Loss of Nearly 4.5 Million Child Care Slots," Center for American Progress, April 24, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2020/04/24/483817/coronavirus-pandemic-lead-permanent-loss-nearly-4-5-million-child-care-slots/>; Eleanor Mueller, "'Crashing Down': How the Child Care Crisis Is Magnifying Racial Disparities," *POLITICO*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/22/coronavirus-child-care-racial-disparities-377058>; Liuba Grechen Shirley, "If America Doesn't Invest in Childcare, Who Will Watch Our Kids When We Go Back to Work?" Ideas, *Time*, April 23, 2020, <https://time.com/5826420/childcare-stimulus-coronavirus/>.

⁴ Although I read Krystale Littlejohn's assessment of a potential post-pandemic chilling effect on birthrates after I became a mother, I identified with her reading of the relationships among gender, childcare labor, and other forms of paid labor. According to Joe Pinsker's reporting in *The Atlantic*, "Littlejohn, a sociologist at the University of Oregon, suggested that some people who were previously considering having a child

might postpone doing so after becoming 'hyper-aware' of the burdens of 'parenting in general, and pandemic parenting specifically,' and that women in particular might be more conscious of the effects that parenthood can have on their career." Joe Pinsker, "'We're Talking About More Than Half a Million People Missing From the U.S. Population,'" *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/07/us-coronavirus-deaths-births-population/614503/>.

⁵ Koa Beck, "Don't Call the Pandemic a Setback for Feminism," *Ideas, Time*, December 23, 2020, <https://time.com/5923763/white-feminism-pandemic/>; Gates, "Broken Caregiving System;" Gates, "Rethinking Caregiving;" Lauren Birchfield Kennedy and Katie Mayshak, "Say Hello to That New Spin Studio and Goodbye to Your Child Care," *Opinion, The New York Times*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/opinion/child-day-care-coronavirus.html>.

⁶ Articles from this time period appear here and throughout the notes below. Kate Smith, "Working Moms Among the Hardest Hit by Coronavirus Pandemic," *CBS News*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/working-moms-among-hardest-hit-coronavirus-pandemic/>; Titan Alon, Matthias Doepke, Jane Olmstead-Rumsey, and Michèle Tertilt, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality," NBER Working Paper 26947 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w26947>.

Early reporting on care labor and the pandemic also included a focus on care labor and academic productivity. See Anna Fazackerley, "Women's Research Plummet During Lockdown - but Articles from Men Increase," *the Guardian*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/12/womens-research-plummet-during-lockdown-but-articles-from-men-increase>; Colleen Flaherty, "No Room of One's Own: Early Journal Submission Data Suggest COVID-19 Is Tanking Women's Research Productivity," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/early-journal-submission-data-suggest-covid-19-tanking-womens-research-productivity>; Alessandra Minello, "The Pandemic and the Female Academic," *Nature*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01135-9>.

⁷ A simple purview of *The New York Times* parenting section in 2020 captures the multifaceted problems that arise from this crunch. For other examples see Chloe I. Cooney, "The Parents Are Not All Right," *Medium*, April 5, 2020, <https://gen.medium.com/parents-are-not-ok-66ab2a3e42d9>; Farhad Manjoo, "Two Parents. Two Kids. Two Jobs. No Child Care," *Opinion, The New York Times*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/opinion/coronavirus-parenting-burnout.html>; Smith, "Working Moms."

In early 2021, *The New York Times* launched "The Primal Scream" series furthering their reporting on this subject. Jessica Grose, Jessica Bennett, Melonyce McAfee, and Farah Miller, eds., "The Primal Scream: America's Mothers Are in Crisis," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/02/04/parenting/working-moms-coronavirus.html>.

⁸ Cindy Axne and Katherine Clark, "America Needs to Start Treating Childcare as What It Is: Vital Infrastructure," *Ideas, Time*, September 14, 2020, <https://time.com/5888887/childcare-crisis-coronavirus/>; Amanda Becker, "Middle-Income and Rural Families Disproportionately Grapple with Child-Care Deserts, New Analysis Shows," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/22/middle-income-rural-families->

[disproportionately-grapple-with-child-care-deserts-new-analysis-shows/](#); Kavitha Cardoza, "Researchers Warn Nearly Half Of U.S. Child Care Centers Could Be Lost To Pandemic," *NPR*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/07/909634878/researchers-warn-about-half-of-child-care-centers-in-u-s-could-be-lost-to-pandem>; Renée Cherez, "Protect Early Child Care Providers," *Anti-Racism Daily*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.antiracismdaily.com/archives/protect-early-child-care-providers-anti-racism-daily>; Jessen-Howard and Workman, "Child Care Slots;" Kennedy and Mayshak, "Goodbye;" Mueller, "Crashing Down;" Alissa Quart, "Day-Care Slots for Babies Are Vanishing. Now Their Parents Can't Work," Perspective, *Washington Post*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/06/babies-child-care-centers-shortage-slots/>; Abby Vesoulis, "COVID-19 Has Nearly Destroyed the Childcare Industry—and It Might Be Too Late to Save It," *Time*, September 8, 2020, <https://time.com/5886491/covid-childcare-daycare/>.

⁹ Alon et al., "Gender Equality;" Beck, "Don't Call;" Brooks, "Feminism Has Failed;" Talha Burki, "The Indirect Impact of COVID-19 on Women," *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 20, no. 8 (2020): 904–5, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30568-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30568-5); Patricia Cohen and Tiffany Hsu, "Pandemic Could Scar a Generation of Working Mothers," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/business/economy/coronavirus-working-women.html>; Courtney Connley, "More Than 860,000 Women Dropped Out of the Labor Force in September, According to New Report," *CNBC*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.cbc.com/2020/10/02/865000-women-dropped-out-of-the-labor-force-in-september-2020.html>; Sonia Elks, "75% of Mothers in the UK Have Had to Cut Their Working Hours in Lockdown," *World Economic Forum*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/childcare-coronavirus-covid19-lockdown-mothers-inequality/>; Gates, "Broken Caregiving System;" Gates, "Rethinking Caregiving;" Jessica Grose, "Mothers Are the 'Shock Absorbers' of Our Society," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/parenting/working-moms-job-loss-coronavirus.html>; Jessica Grose, "'They Go to Mommy First,'" *The New York Times*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/parenting/working-moms-coronavirus.html>; Alisha Haridasani Gupta, "Why Did Hundreds of Thousands of Women Drop Out of the Work Force?" *The New York Times*, October 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/03/us/jobs-women-dropping-out-workforce-wage-gap-gender.html>; National Women's Law Center, "Four Times More Women Than Men Dropped Out of the Labor Force in September," October 2, 2020, <https://nwlc.org/resources/four-times-more-women-than-men-dropped-out-of-the-labor-force-in-september/>; Alexandra Olson and Cathy Bussewitz, "Child Care Crisis Pushes US Mothers Out of the Labor Force," *NBC Boston*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/coronavirus/child-care-crisis-pushes-us-mothers-out-of-the-labor-force/2189764/>; Claire Cain Miller, "When Schools Closed, Americans Turned to Their Usual Backup Plan: Mothers," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/upshot/schools-closing-mothers-leaving-jobs.html>; Petersen, "Feminist Nightmare;" Smith, "Working Moms."

¹⁰ Matthew Lavietes, Oscar Lopez, and Ellen Wulforst, "'A Pandemic in a Pandemic': Coronavirus Deepens Racial Gaps in America," *Reuters*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-race-money-insight-idUSKBN25G1EW>; Petersen, "Feminist Nightmare." For early coverage of racial disparities in COVID mortality, see, for example, Fabiola Cineas, "Covid-19 Is Disproportionately Taking Black Lives," *Vox*, April 8, 2020,

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2020/4/7/21211849/coronavirus-black-americans>; Juana Summers, "Racial Disparities in COVID-19 Impact Emerge as Data Is Slowly Released," *NPR*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/09/831174878/racial-disparities-in-covid-19-impact-emerge-as-data-is-slowly-released>.

¹¹ Connley, "Women Dropped;" National Women's Law Center, "Labor Force;" Petersen, "Feminist Nightmare."

¹² Gates, "Broken Caregiving System;" Kelly Glass, "Black Families Were Hit Hard by the Pandemic. The Effects on Children May Be Lasting," *The New York Times*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/parenting/coronavirus-black-children-inequality.html>; Alisha Haridasani Gupta, "Why Some Women Call This Recession a 'Shcession,'" *The New York Times*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/us/unemployment-coronavirus-women.html>; Chris Isidore, "Early Coronavirus Job Losses Hitting Minorities, Women, Teens Particularly Hard," *CNN*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/04/economy/minority-job-losses-coronavirus/index.html>; C. Nicole Mason, "The System Was Never Designed for Working Moms," *Perspective*, *The Lily*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.thelily.com/the-system-was-never-designed-for-working-moms/>.

¹³ Mueller, "'Crashing Down;'" Cristina Novoa, "How Child Care Disruptions Hurt Parents of Color Most," Center for American Progress, June 29, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2020/06/29/486977/child-care-disruptions-hurt-parents-color/>.

For as much as coverage has revealed these racial disparities, it can also distort through a persistent media focus on white professional women's losses (Beck) or leaving unmarked the ways white privilege may manifest in unemployment figures (Gupta). Beck, "Don't Call;" Gupta, "Women Drop Out."

¹⁴ The numbers vary depending on the outlet. Lea J.E. Austin, Bethany Edwards, Raúl Chávez, and Marcy Whitebook, "Racial Wage Gaps in Early Education Employment," Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, UC Berkeley, December 19, 2019, <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/racial-wage-gaps-in-early-education-employment/>; Cherez, "Child Care Providers;" Anna North and Ella Nilsen, "Biden Takes Aim at American Inequality by Investing \$1.8 Trillion in Families," *Vox*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/2021/4/28/22404411/biden-american-families-plan-inequality>.

As Vesoulis and Mueller also note, a significant percentage of establishments threatened by economic downturn within the childcare sector "are minority-owned," representing another concerning data point in this conversation. Mueller, "'Crashing Down;'" Vesoulis, "Childcare Industry."

¹⁵ Again, these problems preceded the media's increased attention in 2020. See note 3. And they were only "new" to people previously insulated from them by their privilege. See Andrea Hsu, "'This Is Too Much': Working Moms Are Reaching the Breaking Point During the Pandemic," *NPR*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/29/918127776/this-is-too-much-working-moms-are-reaching-the-breaking-point-during-the-pandemi>; Anne Helen Petersen, "Other Countries Have Social Safety Nets. The U.S. Has Women," *Culture Study* (blog), November 11, 2020, <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/other-countries-have-social-safety>.

¹⁶ Numerous authors already cited in this piece issue calls for a policy response. See, for example, Beck, "Don't Call;" Gates, "Broken Caregiving System;" Gates, "Rethinking Caregiving;" Jessen-Howard and Workman, "Child Care Slots;" Steven Jessen-Howard, Rasheed Malik, and MK Falgout, "Costly and Unavailable: America

Lacks Sufficient Child Care Supply for Infants and Toddlers," Center for American Progress, August 4, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2020/08/04/488642/costly-unavailable-america-lacks-sufficient-child-care-supply-infants-toddlers/>; Shirley, "Invest in Childcare."

¹⁷ "Transcript: Elizabeth Warren's DNC Speech," *CNN*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/19/politics/elizabeth-warren-speech-transcript/index.html>. Warren is not the only rhetor to use this metaphor. See Axne and Clark, "Vital Infrastructure," Jessen-Howard and Workman, "Child Care Slots;" "I Felt Guilt Making This Decision to Step Out of the Workplace," Institute for Women's Policy Research, November 10, 2020, <https://iwpr.org/media/in-the-lead/i-felt-guilt-making-this-decision-to-step-out-of-the-workplace/>; North and Nilsen, "American Inequality."

¹⁸ This configuration of the problem reflects the metaphor "PROBLEMS ARE PUZZLES" as explained by Lakoff and Johnson. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* with a new afterword (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 21, Kindle.

¹⁹ See Kathryn Jezer-Morton on the ways neoliberalism influences perceptions of childcare options. Kathryn Jezer-Morton, "Day Care Makes the World More Tender," *Romper*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.romper.com/life/a-universal-childcare-policy-will-make-your-world-more-tender>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See, for example, Becker, "Child-Care Deserts;" Cherez, "Child Care Providers;" Jessen-Howard, Malik, and Falgout, "Costly and Unavailable;" North and Nilsen, "American Inequality;" Katie Reilly and Belinda Luscombe, "The Childcare Crisis," *Time*, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://time.com/child-care-crisis/>.

²² Jezer-Morton, "Day Care."

²³ Despite the flaws of the math metaphor, the frame gestures to the financial components of care-related decisions.

²⁴ Charlotte Humphrey, "Ways of Seeing: Biomedical Perspectives on the Social World," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99, no. 12 (2006): 602, <https://doi.org/10.1258/jrsm.99.12.602>. For more on the operation of metaphor, see Riikka Kuusisto, "Heroic Tale, Game, and Business Deal? Western Metaphors in Action in Kosovo," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 1 (2002): 50-68, doi:10.1080/00335630209384359; Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*.

²⁵ Kaitlyn Greenidge, "Impersonating Motherhood," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/parenting/baby/work-conference-life-balance.html>

²⁶ Herein my experience resonates with Ann Shoket's findings. Ann Shoket, "Millennial Women Are Afraid of Motherhood. But It's Not Why You Think," *The Riveter* (blog), February 16, 2020, <https://theriveter.co/voice/millennial-women-are-afraid-of-motherhood/>.

²⁷ Lauren Sandler, "The Secret to Being Both a Successful Writer and a Mother: Have Just One Kid," *The Atlantic*, June 7, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/06/the-secret-to-being-both-a-successful-writer-and-a-mother-have-just-one-kid/276642/>.

²⁸ Louise Doughty, "Lauren Sandler's Flimsy Case for Female Writers Sticking to a One-Child Policy," Opinion, *The Guardian*, June 14, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/14/lauren-sandler-female-writers-one-child>.

²⁹ Alison Flood, "Zadie Smith Criticises Author Who Says More Than One Child Limits Career," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/13/zadie-smith-one-child-career>.

³⁰ Rebecca Mead, "Writers and the Optimal-Child-Count Spectrum," *The New Yorker*, June 14, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/writers-and-the-optimal-child-count-spectrum>.

³¹ This mindset also bears the traces of the ideologies surrounding "productivity" that Laurie Penny attempts to dismantle in light of the pandemic. For Penny's perspective on this "can-do attitude," see Laurie Penny, "Productivity Is Not Working," *Wired*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/question-productivity-coronavirus/>.

³² Beyond the factors listed here, Anne Helen Petersen makes a compelling case on her blog for including capitalism and individualism in this mix. For examples of this argument, see Anne Helen Petersen, "I Don't Know How to Make You Care About Other People," *Culture Study* (blog), March 8, 2020, <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/i-dont-know-how-to-make-you-care>; Anne Helen Petersen, "What Sort of Sacrifice It Will Demand," *Culture Study* (blog), May 3, 2020, <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/what-sort-of-sacrifice-it-will-demand>; Anne Helen Petersen, "You Still Need to Have the Conversation," *Culture Study* (blog), November 15, 2020 <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/you-still-need-to-have-the-conversation>. See also Penny, "Productivity."

³³ Although I inhabit a markedly different positionality than Zadie Smith, her reflections on her investments in control, the act of writing in relationship to control, and the limited utility of the self-awareness of these dynamics in impeding their operation deeply resonated with the ways I negotiate my personal attachments to power. Zadie Smith, "Peonies," in *Intimations: Six Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 1-10.

³⁴ They are not even "new" to this journal. See Jorgenson Borchert, "A Narrative."

³⁵ Again, see Petersen. Petersen, "'Social Safety Nets,'" Anne Helen Petersen, "That Pink Ring in the Toilet Bowl Is Not a Moral Failure," *Culture Study* (blog), August 11, 2019, <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/that-pink-ring-in-the-toilet-bowl>; Anne Helen Petersen, "The Mom Does It," *Culture Study* (blog), December 2, 2020, <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/the-mom-does-it>; C. Nicole Mason, "I Felt Like I Had to Go Part-Time When My Kids Were Young. This Shouldn't Be the Norm," Perspective, *The Lily*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.thelily.com/i-felt-like-i-had-to-go-part-time-when-my-kids-were-young-this-shouldnt-be-the-norm/>; Lilith A. Whiley, Hazel Sayer, and Marie Juanchich, "Motherhood and Guilt in a Pandemic: Negotiating the 'New' Normal with a Feminist Identity," *Gender, Work & Organization*, published ahead of print, December 28, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12613>.

³⁶ "I Felt Guilt;" Mason, "Part-Time;" Petersen, "'Social Safety Nets,'" Whiley, Sayer, and Juanchich, "Motherhood and Guilt." See also Banu Özkazanç-Pan and Alison Pullen, eds., "Feminist Frontiers Special Issue: Gendered Labor and Work, Even in Pandemic Times," *Gender, Work & Organization* 27, no. 5 (2020): 675-926; Jessica McCrory Calarco, Elizabeth Anderson, Emily Meanwell, and Amelia Knopf, "'Let's Not Pretend It's Fun': How Covid-19-Related School and Childcare Closures Are Damaging Mothers' Well-Being," preprint, submitted October 3, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/jyvk4>; Jessica McCrory Calarco, Emily Meanwell, Elizabeth Anderson, and Amelia Knopf, "My Husband Thinks I'm Crazy': Covid-19-Related Conflict in Couples with Young Children," preprint, submitted October 9, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/cpkj6>; "COVID 19: A Sociocultural Archive," *Gender, Work & Organization* 28, no. S1 (2021): 66-275.

³⁷ Underscoring the point, Jessica Calarco, co-author of early pandemic studies revealing mothers' internalization of failure, expresses a similar sentiment: "even though I study this stuff, it's hard not to judge myself against the standard[s]" for performing motherhood. Petersen, "Social Safety Nets."

Penny espouses a similar awareness in her interrogation of "self-optimization" and the pandemic, noting that participating in "marches" has not remedied her fixation on individual productivity. Penny, "Productivity;"

³⁸ Elks, "75% of Mothers." Though tenure provides a degree of job security, I worried nonetheless about others' perceptions of my leave.

³⁹ For more on the coronavirus pandemic's effects on single parents, see again Alon et al., "Gender Equality;" Smith, "Working Moms."

⁴⁰ Alon et al., "Gender Equality," 16-17; Fazackerley, "Women's Research;" Flaherty, "Women's Research Productivity;" Jessica L. Malisch, Breanna N. Harris, Shanen M. Sherrer, Kristy A. Lewis, Stephanie L. Shepherd, Pumtiwitt C. McCarthy, Jessica L. Spott et al., "Opinion: In the Wake of COVID-19, Academia Needs New Solutions to Ensure Gender Equity," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 27 (2020): 15378–81, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2010636117>; Minello, "The Pandemic."

⁴¹ For a rich interrogation of the relationships among privilege, suffering, and the pandemic, see Zadie Smith, "Suffering Like Mel Gibson," in *Intimations: Six Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 29-36.

⁴² Smith, "Peonies," 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵ Many people have played upon the numeric allusion contained in the year 2020 to advance ocular metaphors and/or promise "insight." Although Pooja Lakshmin does not rely heavily on this metaphor, she calls for "recogniz[ing]" the structural factors beyond parents' control. In other words, *The New York Times* "Primal Scream" series includes this same call to retrain parents' "sight" as they seek to make sense of their pandemic experiences and counter narratives of personal failure. Pooja Lakshmin, "How Society Has Turned Its Back on Mothers," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/parenting/working-mom-burnout-coronavirus.html>.

See also Beck's contextualization of care labor issues as she reads them alongside racial justice efforts in (and preceding) 2020. Beck, "Don't Call."

⁴⁶ For just a few examples of these arguments, see Brooks, "Feminism Has Failed;" Burki, "The Indirect Impact;" Miller, "Backup Plan: Mothers;" Petersen, "Social Safety Nets."

⁴⁷ Ezra Klein, "There Are No Good Choices," *Vox*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/21432760/coronavirus-2020-trump-government-response-covid-19-biden-america>. Petersen makes this case in numerous different ways on her blog. See Petersen, *Culture Study* (blog), especially the articles cited in note 50.

⁴⁸ Beck, "Don't Call." See also Brooks, "Feminism Has Failed."

⁴⁹ Brooks, "Feminism Has Failed;" Dawn Huckelbridge, "COVID-19 Is Showing Us, Now More Than Ever Before, That We Need National Paid Leave," op-ed, *NBC News*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/know-your-value/feature/covid-19-showing-us-now-more-ever-we-need-national-ncna1235488>; Klein, "No Good Choices;" Petersen, *Culture Study* (blog).

⁵⁰ Again, see Petersen, *Culture Study* (blog), especially Anne Helen Petersen, "Habituation to Horror," *Culture Study* (blog), September 9, 2020,

<https://annehelen.substack.com/p/habitation-to-horror>; Anne Helen Petersen, "Parenting Burnout," *Culture Study* (blog), August 4, 2019, <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/parenting-burnout>; Petersen, "Social Safety Nets." See also Penny, "Productivity;" Petersen, "Feminist Nightmare."

⁵¹ Lakshmin, "Society." While proofreading the final version of this article, a considerable amount of public discourse is taking up these questions in response to President Biden's Address to Congress on April 28, 2021 during which he proposed critical support for families and caregivers via the American Families Plan. "Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress," The White House, April 29, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/29/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress/>; Heather Long, "Top 5 Takeaways from Biden's American Families Plan," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/04/28/top-takeaways-american-families-plan/>; North and Nilsen, "American Inequality;" Jim Tankersley and Dana Goldstein, "Biden Details \$1.8 Trillion Plan for Workers, Students and Families," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/us/politics/biden-american-families-plan.html>.