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FEMINIST FRONTIERS

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Towards a feminist parental ethics

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[Correction added on 6 May, 2021 after online publication: The copyright line was changed]

Abstract

Drawing on our experiences of parenting during the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, we explore the potential for a *feminist parental ethics* through which parenting can be rethought, reclaimed, and so brought forth as a vital and valuable assemblage of collective articulation work, shared "motherings," and embodied interconnectivities of caring for and caring with the other. A feminist parental ethics is particularly important in the neoliberal academic context, where the responsibilities of caregiving that lockdown has thrust upon many workers in higher education have been largely downplayed, dismissed, or even ignored across the sector in the interest of maintaining "business as usual." In response, we ask: "who is caring for the parents?" and we call for an extended idea of parenting beyond the familial as a means of differently organizing our societies, workplaces, and institutions around a shared locus of care.

KEYWORDS
care, ethics, higher education, pandemic, parenting

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2015, an independent video game was released called *Who's Your Daddy?*[1] in which players can choose to be either a baby bent on committing suicide or an incompetent father who must try to keep the baby safe until "mom" returns at 4 p.m. The game takes place in a family home over 4-min rounds and players have to out-think each other in a simulated life or death struggle. The player taking the baby role is able to crawl into an oven that has been

Simon Kelly and Adele Senior should be considered joint first authors, as the alphabetical order signifies that both authors worked equally in the development of the ideas.

accidentally turned on, drown itself in a bath or a sink full of water, push a metal fork into a power socket, drink bleach, and so on while the father is equipped with socket covers, medicine, and the ability to shut doors, secure dangerous objects and furniture, and turn off dangerous home appliances. The game designers' intention was to create a darkly satirical strategy game using the dangers of the domestic world, the incompetence of the father figure, and the threat of the returning mother as its premise. It is meant to be humorous and light-hearted fun for gamers, but like so many cultural artefacts (particularly when viewed through a global pandemic) the game holds a disturbing mirror up to the world it seeks to represent. There is a certain David Lynch *Blue Velvet*-era suburban veneer about the domestic game world depicted. The home is comfortable, spacious, and indicative of middle-class affluence. The family is white by default with no settings available to change ethnicity or appearance, and a heteronormative family structure is reinforced by the character descriptions: "mom," "dad," "son." The only two playable characters are male, whilst the "mom" is an off-screen non-playable character whose presence is felt only as a warning text that flashes on screen at the beginning of each game round: *Watch your son! Mom should be home by 4*. Yet beneath the surface of this suburban, homely, and supposedly "normal" monoculture of white affluent middle-class domesticity there lies the threat of violence and death around every corner. The title of the game itself references misogynistic sexual domination and within the game's content crude gender stereotypes are reinforced via the bungling father and the disciplinarian mother—whose responsibility it presumably is to chastise the father for not performing his parental role correctly. Whether intentionally or not this video game provides a depiction of home life haunted by its shadowy other: the potentially violent and dark unheimlich in which every signifier of hospitality contains the potential for hostility (Caputo, 1997) as the familiarity of the home and the parental care within it is shot through with the strange and unsettling. To do parenting in this setting means to rush around the house, with little time to think, deploying short-term tactics in a bid to fend off imminent threats in order to provide temporary moments of safety before the next round of care begins.

As stark and unpleasant as this video game is, it serves as an illustration of what parental care can often feel like. Even in ordinary circumstances caring for young children can be physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. Spending a day—or even a few hours—running after a toddler who seems magnetically attracted to every domestic danger around them will be something that is familiar to most parents and carers. When combined with the added threat of a global pandemic, parental care takes on a more expansive and exhausting status as managing boundaries between home and work, infection and safety, and physical health and economic productiveness dominate your thoughts leaving little space and energy for anything else. Secondly, as a cultural representation of parenting, this video game also provides a provocative example of how stereotypes of parenting are perpetuated in the popular imagination. The parenting depicted in this game represents a particular vision of gendered care in which any outward physical gestures of affection, intimacy, and compassion for the infant give way to a paternalistic and frantic drive to ensure safety, as your job as a player is not to *care* for your virtual son, but to *watch* him by controlling space, materials, and his body in order to efficiently police this problematic other. This is an imagined idea of masculine care as agentic, transitory, emotionally distant, and driven by utility via the achievement of short-term tangible goals and quantifiable outcomes. In contrast, any visions of maternal care are absent from the game with the presence of the mother figure serving merely as a device to motivate the actions of the players and their male avatars, and whose imminent return to the family home marks both the end of the game and the reinstatement of the domestic status quo. As such, cultural artefacts like *Who's Your Daddy?* offer a novel starting point for understanding and critically reflecting upon the experiences and representations of parenting and care during this global crisis.

It is against this fictional backdrop that we reflect on our own experiences of parenting during a pandemic as two full-time academics living and working in the United Kingdom and caring for our two young boys (2 and 7 years old at the time of writing) during the first 7 months (and counting) of the global SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, pandemic of 2020. We explore what a conflation of home, work, and daily mortal threat has meant to us as we attempt to reconcile this ongoing crisis with our role as parents when our local school, nursery, and universities closed for 6 months between March and August, and as our usual network of "outsourced care" (Stephens, 2015) and familial support fell away in the wake of government-imposed lockdowns and social distancing measures. We consider the emotional, cognitive, and

physical effort that caring for our small children while working full-time has required. These include the daily challenges of balancing academic labor with managing the constant small decisions and actions that could potentially turn playtime into a trip to the hospital as surfaces, walls, corners, doors, door handles, hinges, stairs, small objects, large objects, food, clothing, toys, and seemingly any other material phenomenon could instantly transform into something that can harm, maim, or kill a small child. Meanwhile, outside of the home, the constant threat of being infected by the virus looms over every family walk, every contact with a surface, a door or handrail, and on every trip to the local supermarket. For us, to parent during this period has often felt like playing several very serious strategy games all at the same time: A kind of multidimensional, never-ending round of *Who's Your Daddy?* with every waking moment of the day (and often the night) requiring not only careful planning, risk assessing, and constant monitoring, but also an ever-expanding repertoire of what Susan Leigh Star (1991) and Lucy Suchman (1996) have termed "articulation work": the ongoing and invisible work of *in situ* repairs and improvisations to maintain organizational order.

As the weeks of lockdown and social distancing have now turned into months, our relationship with parenting has also changed as we slowly learned to navigate our shared invisible domestic caring "shifts" (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) alongside the opposing and interrelated demands and expectations of our highly visible professional academic work. Working this routine for months on end has made us realize that there is an urgent need to rethink and resituate ideas of parenting within academic discourse in order to challenge subtle and persistent notions that parental care somehow sits outside of academic life as some kind of private and mildly embarrassing hobby or pastime that is reluctantly tolerated, but often ignored by fellow academics and university management. In contrast, we explore the potential of a *feminist parental ethics* as a means of explicitly situating parenting at the center of what it means to be an academic as part of a broader embodied and relational mode of care that includes and enrolls many others beyond the traditional role of domestic parental caregivers and children. Here we take inspiration from the etymological Latin root of "parenting" as *parire* meaning to "give birth to" and "bring forth"[2] in which *to parent* is to engage in a shared act of embodied, natal, and relational qualities of care for the other (Arendt, 1958; Senior, 2016). Following this, we argue that parenting should neither be reduced merely to a set of invisible domestic shifts of childminding or childrearing that often fall disproportionately to women, nor placed outside of (and often in opposition to) formal accounts of paid employment and professional life. Instead, we reflect on our experiences of being locked down and socially distanced to explore how parenting might be rethought, reclaimed, and so *brought forth* to be acknowledged as a vital and valuable assemblage of collective articulation work, shared "motherings" (Ruddick, 1983, 1990, 2009, 2016), and embodied interconnectivities of caring for and caring with the other (Tronto, 2013).

In contributing to this pandemic section of "Feminist Frontiers" we seek to start a conversation about parenting as academics and about the many ways in which we all benefit from and participate in various acts of parenting that span, depend on, and contribute to a range of diverse (and often invisible) economies to which we all belong (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008). Throughout the pandemic the shared act of parenting has been evident in the way in which the production and maintenance of "the university" itself has depended upon domestic interconnections of adults, children, home offices, personal electronic devices, home Internet connections, healthcare facilities, supermarkets, and many other human and non-human actors that together have enabled universities to continue to exist and function throughout this crisis. This is not "*business*-as-usual" as many universities proudly claim. It is *relationality-and-interconnectivity-as-usual*, *mothering-as-usual*, and *parenting-as-usual*. All formed out of the generosity and care provided by the many others whose collective labor falls outside of the accepted neoliberal narratives of how our societies, our organizations, and our universities operate, and about which university managerial structures in particular seem to have little understanding of, or appreciation for. In opposing this invitation to return to a "business-as-usual" we propose a feminist parental ethics as a potential counter-language (McCann, Granter, Hyde, & Aroles, 2020) through which to challenge this neoliberal academic order where full-time responsibilities of caregiving that lockdown has thrust upon many working in higher education (HE) have been largely downplayed, dismissed, or even ignored across the sector. In response, we ask: *who is caring for the parents*? and we call for an extended idea of parenting beyond the familial, which includes and enrolls a HE context that seems to have forgotten its own caregiving role.

2 | NAVIGATING THE "NEW NORMAL" WITHIN THE NEOLIBERAL ACADEMY

In Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung's (1989) *The Second Shift*, the authors paint a vivid picture of the demands placed on working parents and particularly mothers. Long before the 2020 global pandemic, Hochschild and Machung observed that "job culture" has replaced "family culture" as the prime reason for living and so parents and children have had to adapt to this by structuring home life to mirror the patterns and rhythms of working life. Where, for Hochschild and Machung, the "first shift" represents paid employment, the "second shift" identifies the domestic unpaid labor and care that has to be managed usually by women in a mothering role. This trend to divide paid and unpaid labor along gender lines continues into the 21st century with OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) figures showing that all 37 member countries report a similar first and second shift distinction with women taking on around half to two-thirds of the unpaid labor in comparison to men.[3] A similar trend for attributing second shift work to women was also identified in Hardy et al.'s (2018) recent study of the division of labor among academic parents and caregivers. In Hochschild's (2001) subsequent work *The Time Bind*, she also adds a "third shift." This is not paid or unpaid labor, but the ongoing emotional labor to repair the damage of a Taylorized working life on children who—living a life framed by their parents' work schedules and even through the organization of school life—have to absorb and embody the impact of this late-modern work ethic themselves.

In pre-COVID-19 times our own two young boys, as the children of full-time academics working in two different UK universities, have similarly grown accustomed to their mummy and daddy working through these three shifts: Rushing them out of bed in the morning to get their breakfasts eaten, putting their clothes on and packing their bags before whisking them off to school and nursery so that we can find a parking space on campus for that 9 a.m. meeting, lecture, or tutorial. This pattern has been mirrored in our evenings (when first shift transitions into second shift) with nursery and after-school club pickups, meal preparation, bath and bedtime routines, before mummy and daddy return to their laptops to answer emails, prepare teaching, and perhaps even try to write. As feminists we try hard to divide both paid and unpaid labor equally between us and so share each of these shifts. We have worked hard to support each other so that we are at the same mid-point in our careers and on similar salaries. In Yamashita's (2016) terms we would be categorized as "dual-earners/dual-caregivers" and before lockdown was imposed, we had almost perfected this shared daily routine. Our children had also become used to this way of working (did they even have a choice?) as we took advantage of any and every opportunity to outsource our parental care to support our academic careers (Hochschild, 2012; Stephens, 2015). Thinking back now, none of us (including and perhaps especially our children) enjoyed this hectic schedule, but we accepted this pace of life as necessary for maintaining our careers and family life. After all, there was no alternative. As parents, mindful of the Taylorian work ethic we were imposing on family life, we tried to put as much emotional labor into the third of Hochschild's shifts in making sure that our two boys were protected as much as possible from the harsher demands of our jobs, and so that they never felt neglected or somehow less valued when teaching, grading student work, administration and research deadlines piled up and pushed against the time we should be spending with them.

This all changed following the introduction of the UK COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures on March 23, 2020. As a family, we had already entered voluntary self-isolation the previous week when one of us developed a fever, a cough, and fatigue, quickly followed by both of our children displaying mild symptoms. We immediately self-isolated for what we hoped would be the required 14-day period only to realize that this home situation was potentially going to last for many more weeks as lockdown was announced and our local school, nursery, and both our university campuses closed for the foreseeable future. Fortunately, we all recovered our health soon after, but due to a lack of testing we still do not know to this day if any of us even had the coronavirus infection. Significantly, for the first time in our adult lives we found our carefully honed daily routine paused indefinitely. Along with this, our attempt at successfully managing Hochschild and Machung's three "shifts" was immediately overturned, contorted, and compressed as we came to terms with the reality that our home was now to be our place of teaching, research, administration, student pastoral care, as well as our nursery, school, and soft-play area all rolled into one.

With no time to prepare we had to hope that we had everything we needed to cater for the needs of our children, but with panic buying starting to spread and toilet paper, food, nappies, and even children's paracetamol and thermometers flying off the supermarket shelves we realized how hopelessly vulnerable we were when the supply chains we took for granted started to falter and the availability of outsourced and extended familial care disappeared behind the new lockdown and shielding restrictions. It also became obvious from the first few days of lockdown that our work as teaching academics was not expected to stop or even pause for breath while we tried to regroup and adjust to these sudden changes. Instead, academics across the UK were asked to treat university life as "business as usual," and with this curious and triumphant "business" language came a new lexicon of "pivoting to the online," "facing new challenges together," and of course the phrase "new normal," as academics were expected to continue their teaching while moving content online, gaining approval for new alternative assessments, and learning how to operate new digital platforms like *Zoom* and later *Microsoft Teams*. Looking back now, it is interesting to recall how well this supposed "new normal" blended seamlessly with the "old normal" as this period of crisis served to fast-track—in the name of expediency—many of the structural and cultural changes that underwrite what has been termed the "neoliberal university" (Ball, 2016; Collini, 2012; McCann et al., 2020). In a period of days and weeks, sector-wide moves were made to adopt more top-down decision making; a centralization of power and accountability; and a shrinking sphere of autonomy over one's teaching and research time as technologies designed to potentially enhance and liberate academic and student life were quickly turned into new systems of total accountability and digital compliance. Anecdotally, colleagues we have spoken to in other universities during this period reported experiencing rapidly rising workloads, increased visibility, and more scrutiny and micro-management over their teaching practice and daily work. In contrast, they found that any opportunities for academic input, participation, and consultation began to shrink in the face of impossible deadlines, pre-made decisions, and benevolent (but ultimately impractical) suggestions to "consult your line manager" for any issues or problems you might need to discuss. Inevitably, this need for expediency also meant that there was little time to consider the personal circumstances of staff and particularly those with child and dependent caring responsibilities. After all, we were all in this together!

For us, now living and working at home with our two boys, trying to navigate this "business-as-usual" rhetoric was particularly difficult. Here our carefully coordinated shift patterns were reconstituted as each shift became indistinguishable from another until over time a new and malformed kind of "fourth shift" state started to push through. This was a shift that had no start or end, contained all of the other three shifts simultaneously, but with the added requirement that an appearance of effortless professionalism was projected outwards through our computer screens to show beyond any doubt that we were still "at work." There was no need for Human Resources to be called, no need for discussions of flexible working arrangements, competency, and changes to our employment contracts and salaries: *We were at work*. Indeed, it was this requirement to put on a good show of being "at work" that seemed to become the norm for everyone—regardless of caring responsibilities—as a kind of *don't ask; don't tell* culture started to emerge in which we all knew we were struggling, but we also knew that there was nobody who could really offer any practical help. This feeling was underlined by the fact that there was no agreed HE sector-wide support for parents or carers. There was no discussion by sector governing bodies or central government about possible furlough schemes for academics, and no national or local conversations about introducing new forms of paid parental leave to manage long-term childcare needs. Instead, the silence around how to care for the carers was (and still is) deafening.[4]

In the wake of this silence, like many academic carers across the UK, we found ourselves working every hour of every day during the first weeks and months of lockdown to ensure that we fulfilled our duties as academics to care for the students we taught and supervised so that they could still complete their modules, undertake their assessments, and progress with their studies. In contrast to the silence around domestic caring responsibilities, there was no such silence when it came to caring for students. Instead, the need to care for students (and the income they represent) was loudly prioritized across the sector while at the same time parents like us had to find enough spare time—when not staring at our screens and clicking at our electronic devices—to offer the same attention to our own children now at home and in need of constant love, reassurance, education, and entertainment as they tried to

adjust to their own "new normal" of losing playtime with their friends and sharing a domestic space with a full-time home-working mummy and daddy.

In this way, the pandemic has revealed the stark inequalities that have arguably always shaped academic life—particularly in the 21st century. It has reminded us that all academic careers are not equal, and that this is not a level playing field in which everyone faces similar challenges and opportunities to succeed. We felt this inequality acutely when we took on our role as parents. Reflecting on our lives pre-children, it does seem that the more care roles you have in your life, the less well you fit with what Baker and Brewis (2020) have recently termed the neoliberal academic "ideal worker." As Baker and Brewis note, this "perfected self" is constructed (from both within and without) through a combination of external formal performance indicators, journal rankings, citation scores, H-indexes, and peer pressure combined with personal pride, professional envy (compare and despair), and ambition to set high expectations for how productive you should be: How many 3 and 4 ranked articles you should be writing; how much research income you should be generating; and how well you are able to create and service a suitably broad and international set of professional networks, collaborations, and online profiles. As Baker and Brewis note, this creates a professional identity undergirded by melancholy in which we all feel like underachieving imposters whose worth is measured by quantities of outputs rather than the quality of teaching and scholarship. As reported recently in a personal blog by anonymous UK academic "thehistorian," the consensus among colleagues in academic life is that it is just "no fun anymore" as the joy in the profession has been slowly sucked out and replaced with convoluted bureaucratic systems and a culture of presenteeism and competition.[5]

Until we decided to start a family ourselves, we were fortunate enough—although not by design—to broadly "fit" this template of the neoliberal ideal academic worker. As two white British-born adults with no visible impairments we had an outward appearance that was similar enough to the majority of academics working in the UK and benefited from the privileges that this appearance sadly affords (see Croxford, 2018; Dar, Liu, Martinez Dy, & Brewis, 2020; Weale, 2019). However, some factors were not consistent with this subject position. For instance, we both come from working-class families, we were both the first in our families to gain PhDs, we each have distinctive "working-class" regional accents, all of which set us slightly apart from many of our white (often curiously accent-less) middle-class UK colleagues. However, we were publishing in highly ranked journals, we could put in the extra hours required to balance teaching commitments with research "targets," and we had the social flexibility and institutional support to attend events and conferences wherever and whenever they may be held. Looking back, we also realize that we could do all of this *because we had very few other people in our lives who relied on us to provide them with care*. In many ways—and without realizing—we had designed a world around us that kept any care responsibilities to a minimum. We were fortunate that our own parents were still in good health and no one really depended on us outside of work. We could live wherever we wanted, come and go as we please, work as early or as late as we liked, take on and juggle multiple work commitments, let our home get untidy, forget to buy food and order in, or eat out instead. We could even afford to take time off occasionally and disconnect from all of these commitments to recharge. In other words, we were able to thrive in this neoliberal system of individual performance management as relatively unattached, career-focused, healthy, young, white, cis adults. Fitting in also meant we could accumulate the required intellectual, professional, and social capital along the way, and we were (to some extent) rewarded for it.

When we decided to start a family, however, we immediately (and for the first time) started to feel a palpable friction between our personal and professional lives as we felt Hochschild's "time bind" begin to tighten around us. Our attention, time, and energy had to be more carefully divided up as cracks started to show in our meticulously crafted and groomed neoliberal academic identities. We were forced to make more and more sacrifices to match up against the performance levels, outputs, and work ethic of our past selves. Our sense of belonging within the academy also started to falter as we no longer felt that we completely fitted in. As Claire Cain Miller (2020) writing for the *New York Times* similarly observed, the coronavirus has:

> … exposed uncomfortable truths about working families. One is that parenting is not confined to after-work hours. Another is that raising children is not just a lifestyle choice, akin to a demanding hobby. A third is that working parents can't do it alone (Miller, 2020).

Trying to cope during this pandemic has gradually turned these cracks between our academic and parenting selves into deep chasms. It has also revealed who in our professional community has the ability to cope (or at least keep up the appearance of coping) and who does not. Moreover, it has revealed who has access to the *time* and *energy* required to continue playing the game of output production, presenteeism, and high performance working that is still demanded and rewarded by the COVID-19-era neoliberal academy. Following Miller's point that working parents "can't do it alone," we also have a deeply unsettling feeling that those in the academy who have thrived in this pandemic climate are likely to have the fewest caring responsibilities and where a gendered academic culture of "looking after number one" may be the most effective means of reaping rewards and fast-tracking your career. Indeed, this is a view shared by Professor James Wilsdon (a *Wellcome Trust* research director) who in May 2020 at the peak of the lockdown commented in an interview for the *Guardian Newspaper*: "This is … about the division between those who have caring responsibilities and those who don't … I'd be the first to admit that women bear the brunt of the problem" (Fazackerley, 2020).[6]

3 | PANDEMIC PARENTING AS ARTICULATION WORK

As the days of the lockdown became weeks, we saw our own academic "fast-track" on-ramp collapse and vanish to be replaced with an acute sense of time poverty (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012) with diminishing reservoirs of time and energy to devote adequately to either our childcare or our jobs. A sense of how this pressure was experienced and distributed among our colleagues also became evident during this time with the arrival and installation of *Zoom* video calling software revealing who was able to organize, fully attend, and participate in regular (and sometimes lengthy) *Zoom* meetings scheduled throughout the working week and often into the evening. At first, we fell back on our default need to cope and to keep up appearances and so tried to participate in these meetings with some frequency, but quickly realized that it was impossible to divide our attention between our work and our children. It also felt deeply unfair (and unsafe) to sit our children in front of the television for hours on end while mummy and daddy stared blankly at (while occasionally talking to) our computer screens, often wearing earphones and so making the whole display even more uncanny for our children who would rather we focus our attention on them. As the daily schedule of online departmental, committee, and course meetings, student discussion boards, student email inquiries, and preparation of online lectures and assessments increased, we realized that there was only so much running around the house we could manage with our laptops precariously balanced, while keeping our children entertained, busy, educated, and safe. We also assumed (perhaps naively) that this hectic pace of remote working would be short-lived once online teaching and assessment issues were resolved. However, we underestimated how the neoliberal university system works and how complex bureaucratic processes seem to thrive on and gain pace through crisis. Indeed, as the late David Graeber (2018a, 2018b) observed, while many university systems are necessary for assuring quality of learning and the wellbeing of staff and students, work in the neoliberal university can increasingly feel futile as the rise of what Graeber has famously called the "bullshit job" has steadily found its way into HE.

Over time, *Zoom* meetings turned into *Microsoft Teams* groups and channels with even more efficient ways to communicate and monitor staff interaction. As online systems sped up, new documentation to support the new normal was created, with a variety of new digital forms to be completed, moderated, approved, re-approved, and uploaded to centralized repositories. The move from *Zoom* to *Teams* also required staff to undertake new online training courses to prepare for remote delivery. All of this supported by new documentation to be completed to demonstrate evidence of progress and completion—and with automated email alerts and personalized online

percentages to remind you of work yet to be completed. Across the wider HE sector we also started to see an increase in announcements about new online research events, writing retreats, and symposiums, hastily composed pandemic-themed funding calls and online conferences, while colleagues across our professional networks sent out cheery messages via email and social media celebrating recent promotions, publication, and grant award successes. We both looked on at this whirlwind of online activity and academic productivity from our toy-strewn living room in awe and asked ourselves *how on earth is anybody able to do all of this during a pandemic?*

In contrast, hardly anyone seemed to be talking—at least not publicly—about familial caring needs in these first weeks and months of lockdown. Perhaps it was not a subject that particularly warranted attention in the midst of mass infection and death. Parents like us also had neither the time nor energy to give voice to our own experiences. Even if we could speak out it might seem like cynical complaining when so much was being sacrificed by others working in much less comfortable settings. Similarly, within our own informal network of fellow academic parents, a frequent shared concern was that any explicit voicing of the negative impacts of this sudden upheaval to our working lives might be treated by our employers as a question of competency, a rationale for forced fractionalization, or a reduction in working hours—or that our difficulties might simply be ignored. Echoing our concerns, Claire Gagne (2020) similarly observed in April as infection rates around the world started to peak:

> I can't help but wonder how any of this is sustainable. We've suddenly become full-time caregivers, teachers, tech support and emotional support to our kids. We have to stand in as their friends, figure out new ways to connect them to their actual friends (thank you, Messenger Kids) and somehow give them hope that they'll be able to play with their real friends again someday. This is all on top of a full-time job that—true to its name—ordinarily takes up a full day. We are definitely not doing our best work right now (Gagne, 2020).

Parenting under these conditions was not sustainable for many, with the UK Trades Union Congress (2020) report *Forced Out: The Cost of Getting Childcare Wrong* stating that the financial and emotional cost of the pandemic falls disproportionately hard on working families and particularly working mothers. Indeed, many working mothers have been forced to reduce working hours or give up full-time employment altogether in order to manage their childcare during the lockdown period. Certainly, it was impossible to do "your best work" as Gagne states above. However, this statement also risks reducing the status and value of work that mothers and families regularly engage in both before and especially during the pandemic. Indeed, one of the frustrations we have felt as academic parents is that so much of our domestic labor is not valued as work at all. Even as we teach students about gender equality and unpaid labor in the classroom, we have to live with the reality that our "best" work—caring for our own children—may be the work least valued and the least visible in a university system where publishing research *about* caring for our children is worth more than actually parenting them.

This problem of invisible work resonates with the sociological concept of *articulation work* originally developed by A. L. Strauss (1985) as means of extending his pioneering work on social worlds and negotiated orders (A. Strauss, Schatzman, Ehrlich, Bucher, & Sabshin, 1963). Later adapted by Susan Leigh Star (1991) and Lucy Suchman (1996), articulation work refers not to articulation as utterance, as a means of expressing something through language, but as "… the continuous efforts required in order to bring together discontinuous elements of organizations … into working configurations" (Suchman, 1996, p. 407). This is the work of integration, coordination, and intersection; the work of weaving together often disparate social worlds such as home and work. These are the workarounds, the improvisations, and the backstage work carried out by actors that are rarely represented in the formal accounts of the organization, but whose labor is essential for the proper daily functioning of complex systems (Hampson & Junor, 2005).[7] For Star (1991), articulation work also represented an illustration of a "sociology of the invisible" through which the subtle and complex work of lower status groups (often women) is overlooked, whilst the *perceived outcomes* of organizational processes are privileged and attributed to the actions

of higher status (often male) colleagues resulting in a misleading and reified view of how organizations actually operate. Writing in a healthcare context Star noted that through articulation work we can appreciate how reified accounts of formal organization often tell us little about the lived reality of how organizations function, and how authority and decision making are often negotiated among organizational members in ways that subvert the formal hierarchies as represented on organization charts. As Star (1991) observed:

> A nurse is no less an author or respondent than a doctor; a spouse no less a worker than a nurse; a patient no less than an insurance underwriter. Pluralism means conflict and negotiation—both inimical to the perpetuation of reified invisibles. (Star, 1991, p. 277)

Whether universities acknowledge it or not, the everyday work of HE similarly functions through pluralism and negotiation. Institutions may think of themselves as reified efficient top-down pyramids, but the actual accomplishment of work often depends on the invisible articulation workers who continually workaround and improvise to fill the gaps in the (often precarious) formal organizational structures. This invisible work has been no more in evidence than during the global pandemic when university staff, carers, and parents have had to attempt to connect—that is *articulate*—the demands of home and family with the need to continue to service the requirements of the organizations that employ them. As Gagne highlights above, parenting in a pandemic requires a very specific and ongoing juggling of multiple identities and multiple tasks, all of which—to borrow from and adapt Star's phrasing above—are forms of articulation work that are "inimical to the perpetuation of our [reified neoliberal academic selves and the idealized image of university life]." These are the selves that sit in *Zoom* meetings, manage online student discussion boards, assess student work, contribute to committees, aspire to be active researchers while serving as journal reviewers and editorial board members, and so on. Yet behind these reified appearances is the hidden articulation work of sitting next to your child who is watching yet another episode of *Peppa Pig* on a tablet that is *just* out of sight of your laptop's webcam, or using the various audio and video "mute" buttons to prevent the sounds of crying or arguing children from being captured by your microphone during a meeting (while trying to pay attention to both), or simply just disguising the fact that managing breakfast that morning has left you with no time to get properly dressed. Add to this the ongoing labor of meal, snack, and drink preparation; laundry; cleaning; setting up homeschooling tasks which involve a careful combination of motivating, cajoling, bribing, and finally reviewing the task; as well as organizing separate craft activities and games. For those with preschool age children, like our 2-year-old, there is also the endless cleaning up of various bodily fluids and feces, the checking and changing of nappies, washing of hands, changing of clothes, and measuring of temperatures. Any brief opportunities for self-care are a bonus: making sure you are drinking enough water, shower, eat, then carry out all of the housework required to make sure that the next round of meals and snacks are ready and that there are enough clean clothes, plates, bowls, and clean surfaces for your home to function.

This articulation work requires not just coordinated physical action, but also cognitive, sensory, emotional, and deeply embodied labor. There is also the learned judgement of recognizing when that drink is likely to spill, which subtle change of smell indicates that a nappy is full and ready to leak, or when playtime is becoming dangerous. This is just one part of the ongoing embodied care that parents with young children acquire. To borrow both Strauss and Star's terminology, it requires constant management of "pluralism" and "negotiation" and it is labor that is invisible to anyone except the carer—especially when viewed remotely by others via video call—as much of this care, with its visceral, messy, and abject content, is inimical to the sterile and efficient outward projection of the neoliberal academy (Parker, 2018). All of this articulation work is also not an end in itself, it is simply a means of clearing enough physical, mental, and emotional space to allow time for our paid employment. Indeed, it would be possible to write a second article just with a bullet point list of the articulation work required to keep homelife together in order to make limited space for our academic selves. In other words, managing caring responsibilities is not just about those we care for, it is also about managing the expectations of others so that colleagues and line managers

do not have reason to question your ability to fully commit to your job, or to wonder if your caring responsibilities may be depleting you of necessary professional vitality. However, as Perelman (2020) argued, the risk of burnout and exhaustion among parents is not due to a lack of resilience, but instead is due to an unforgiving economic imperative that is pushing through every part of life in lockdown:

> I resent articles that view the struggle of working parents this year as an emotional concern. We are not burned out because life is hard this year. We are burned out because *we are being rolled over by the wheels of an economy that has bafflingly declared working parents inessential*. (Perelman, 2020, emphasis added)

It is precisely through the creation of a new language to describe what is "visible" and "invisible" in our work that we might recognize a first point of intervention for a feminist parental ethics. What if in pushing back against this economic imperative, parents allowed this invisible articulation work and the embodied messiness of care to be made visible? What if we started to share this labor collectively during *Zoom* meetings? What if senior academic and administrative colleagues across the sector took up the role of the "good elder" as promoted recently by Dar et al. (2020) to actively support and facilitate a regular agenda item for all departmental meetings on "caring responsibilities and how to support them"? Perhaps it is the reified hierarchical status of "professionalism" that needs to be disrupted (Motta, 2020)—now more than ever—so that equal status can be ascribed to the articulation work of care.

4 | DIVERSE ECONOMIES AND SMALL ACTS OF CARE

In a recent study of academic friendship, Enslin and Hedge (2019, p. 388) observed that: "In the dark times of today's neoliberal academy what cannot be readily measured cannot be valued." Similarly, through the concept of articulation work we have argued that parenting as caring for the young, elderly, sick, and vulnerable is not valued within the academy precisely because it too cannot be measured by the metrics, represented as KPIs (key performance indicators) and league tables to shape, validate, reward, and monitor our working lives. However, the flaw running through the ethos of the neoliberal academy and the idealized self-sufficient, competitive, and driven academic, is that at some point over one's life course we will all need care. Similarly, we are all potential victims of unforeseen accidents, crime, disasters, or—as is the case in a global pandemic—just one serious illness away from failing to meet (perhaps permanently) the many performance indicators that validate our individual academic excellence.

For Enslin and Hedge (2019), friendship marks an important non-market, non-measurable element in the organization of academic work. This is something that provides a means of coping with the harsher aspects of neoliberal university life: a reaching out and connecting with another for no material benefit other than the desire to enjoy each other's company and to provide mutual support. In their book *The Slow Professor*, Berg and Seeber (2016) suggest a similar role for what they term "holding environments" through which fellow academics might organize themselves into small and mutually trusting collectives through which to vent and share their frustrations with academic work culture. "Venting" for Berg and Seeber is not a euphemism for "whining" (as perhaps a managerial perspective might view it). Instead, it involves creating a community that you can turn to for support and which offers something outside of the competitive accountability culture of many university workplaces. Venting also allows you to express and make sense of your frustrations and to find a way to manage or challenge them. As such, the authors described above are calling on academics to recognize that there are parallel spaces that can exist alongside the neoliberal university—spaces for friendship, community, and belonging—that can offer the potential for creating change in the way we organize, the way we work, and the way we care for one another.

The possibilities of "other worlds" besides neoliberalism is also a central thesis in the work of Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008) who argued that perhaps too much attention and power has been ascribed to neoliberalism—especially by those who seek to critique it—and with the possible result being that we become so consumed by neoliberal ideas and ideologies that we can no longer imagine a world beyond them. Instead, Gibson-Graham recognize that we live in a world of multiple diverse economies of which neoliberalism and capitalism are merely temporary versions of systems that coexist alongside many others. Rather than neoliberalism as the only game in town—the dark force controlling us all—Gibson-Graham offer a more optimistic view by encouraging us to recognize the many invisible forms of work and organization that also contribute to the proper functioning of everyday life. From the more obvious larger scale examples such as publicly funded services, charities, and NGOs (non-governmental organizations), to the less visible cooperative movements, community action groups, local currency schemes, volunteer networks, and the unpaid labor of caring for family members and homemaking.[8] As the authors note, such non-market organizing can constitute up to 50% of economic activity in both rich and poor countries, with cooperative movements employing up to 100 million people worldwide (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 617). The problem lies in the way in which we narrate these economies, privileging some and overlooking others.

As with articulation work discussed earlier, the implication of buying into these reified neoliberal narratives is that we actively discourage ourselves from imagining and enacting new languages and practical strategies for challenging institutional attitudes towards caring responsibilities. Too often it is the carer who is made to feel that it is their fault for having caring duties and that it is the carer and parents who are causing the timetabling problems with inflexible working hours, half-terms, summer holidays, and their inability to travel around the world delivering international teaching and research. For parents especially, the idea that it was "*you that decided to have kids, so you have to figure this out*" is an internal voice that can often be a source of quiet guilt and embarrassment when asking for work adjustments or requiring additional support for deadline extensions due to childcare commitments. However, concepts like articulation work and Gibson-Graham's diverse economies counter such views (imagined or otherwise) that create a false distinction between care and the economic imperative. For example, as Folbre (1994) has demonstrated, parenting of children in particular has its own significant economic benefits since without parents, where would the future generations of students come from to enroll on university courses? What about the future taxpayers, future healthcare and emergency workers, climate activists, policymakers, artists, scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, producers, consumers, and academics? If anything, Folbre (1994) argues, parental care should be explicitly recognized and receive even more financial investment and support as "… while there are good reasons to encourage all capable adults to engage in job training or paid employment, *it is important to remember that nonmarket work is still work. In fact, it is probably the most important work we do*" (p. 89; emphasis added).

Where Gibson-Graham and Folbre offer a counter to the economic imperative, Anna Peterson (2009) makes an equally strong case for the ethical and political power of parenting as a source of moral development for both adults and children through what she terms "small acts of care":

> … Small acts of care are central to the utopian possibilities of domestic life … parenting enables us to live according to some of the values we most need for collective as well as personal goods. Caring for children can teach and nurture characteristic values that find few other strongholds in contemporary mainstream culture. These alternative values include a relational understanding of selfhood, a non-instrumental approach to social interactions, a recognition of lack of ultimate control, and a decentering of oneself to a more modest place in the universe. These values are crucial not only to caring for children but also to creating a more sustainable, generous, and egalitarian society … (Peterson, 2009, p. 61)

Clearly not all persons and families are able to engage in the sharing of these aspirational values and we recognize our own privileged position as academics who have the option to work at home, live a relatively comfortable life, and share the demands of bringing up our children together. However, the lockdown in the UK

(particularly during the first months) has provided many people—regardless of circumstances—with a unique historical moment through which to catch a glimpse of the "shared relational understanding of selfhood" and "a non-instrumental approach to social interactions" that Peterson describes. For a brief time, the transformation of life under lockdown created the conditions through which a desire for "family," "home," and "community" were temporarily privileged over work, wealth generation, and individualism. Across the UK this led to families engaging in small acts of care that became national movements such as the "making rainbows" campaign organized by local schools (BBC News, 2020a) in which young children and parents made and displayed pictures of rainbows in the windows of their homes for others to see. This was followed by the weekly "Clap for Carers" campaign organized originally by yoga instructor Annemarie Plas, which saw individuals and families across the country self-organizing at 8 p.m. every Thursday evening for 5 weeks to clap, bang saucepans, and make noise in support for the work and sacrifice of healthcare workers (Addley, 2020).

While we have sympathy with the view that these campaigns represented empty virtue signaling in place of concrete financial investment and political action (Parkinson, 2020), for us as a family they also provided some unique opportunities for engaging in small acts of care. For example, getting to know our local neighborhood by using our one government sanctioned exercise period each day to search for rainbow pictures. Talking with our eldest son about why the National Health Service is important and why it is constantly under threat by the very politicians clapping along with the public—while we read bedtime stories about *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *Yertle the Turtle*. As Peterson (2009) adds: "… the noninstrumental and relational values that emerge in parenting point to the possibility that families might serve as 'schools of love.' Families can, like friendship and romantic relationships, exemplify different and better models of social life, and perhaps educate their members to desire these alternative values in the public sphere as well" (p. 61).

When thought of as an essential part of a diverse economy—especially during periods of enforced national lockdown—carers and parents not only represent economic value for money, but through their invisible labor they have the potential to bring forth future generations of morally attuned, critically minded citizens capable of facing the challenges of building a better future. The message from the authors discussed above is clear, that caring responsibilities matter and deserve to be actively supported and invested in. Yet even after the lockdown period ended, such arguments are not ones we have heard in national conversations by government, the media, or in the university sector. Even though universities themselves are committed to the education of students (often young people), conversations around staff caring responsibilities are still treated as an expensive organizational aberration to be managed away; a personal matter to be discussed on a case by case basis with HR or with your line manager. However, powerful ideas like those we have begun to explore here provide the potential for what McCann et al. (2020) have recently termed a "counter-language," a necessary narrative first step in challenging and overturning existing stories that our institutions tell us—and which we tell ourselves—and through which space can be made for new organizational possibilities.

5 | TOWARDS A FEMINIST PARENTAL ETHICS

Reflecting on our experiences of living and working in lockdown, we have noted how parenting as a particular form of care has been largely overlooked by the government and by the university sector in their responses to the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, priority has been given to work and the maintenance of "*business*-as-usual." Whether it is appropriate to refer to a university as a "business" has not really been considered. Instead, an element of what Mark Fisher (2009) calls "capitalist realism" has become part of this new normal: business is what we all do and, pandemic or not, we are all "open for business" as there is seemingly no better alternative to describe what a university is or what it does (Collini, 2012). As we have argued, the consequence of this use of language is that the worlds of business, capitalism, and neoliberalism tend to marginalize the worlds of home, families, and children, and so it is perhaps no accident that a *work ethic* has been favored over a *care ethic*. This devaluing of parental care has

strong historical resonances with Sara Ruddick's (1990) pioneering work in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* in which she responds to a similar devaluing of the maternal by resituating both the maternal and mothering as a dynamic practice-based form of reasoning rather than some intuitive, natural, and "unthinking" feminine state (Richards, 2009). To engage in "mothering" is not passive. To care for, protect, and enable an infant to grow and flourish is for Ruddick a deeply political act. More than this, "mothering" is also not something that is exclusive to the mother, even if mothers traditionally take on disproportionate responsibilities for childcare (Ruddick, 2016). Instead, "mothering" can be carried out by any person (male, female, or non-binarized other) who holds responsibility for a child's life and welfare (Ruddick, 1990, 2009).

However, as Julie Stephens (2011, 2016) noted, the decades following the rise of second-wave feminism have created a persistent cultural anxiety surrounding notions of dependency and maternal care as the possibilities for women's liberation have been co-opted by the same neoliberal discourses that promote the ideals of the contemporary academic: That of professional empowerment, individualized self-sufficiency, and the value and status of paid employment underpinned by an ethic of hard work. In other words, this narrow notion of working is more valuable than caring, since to care—particularly to care for those outside of work relationships—may risk diminishing the resources required for self-enrichment. However, in a neoliberal capitalist economy this tension can be easily resolved as the personal wealth accumulated through working "hard" can always be used to purchase and outsource care to somebody else (Stephens, 2015).

While the embodied experience of the parent cannot (and should not) be seamlessly equated to that of the mother (Ruddick, 2016), our experiences of parenting as academics have revealed strong parallels between this marginalization of the maternal and the parental, as caring for dependents and children is treated as something outside of work. The arrival of the global pandemic and the requirement for families to live together in lockdown has also meant that many people (perhaps for the first time) have had to engage in daily practices of mothering over an extended period of time as the social worlds of home and work intersect. For us, this presents a unique historical opportunity to create new spaces for public conversations about the value of maternalism and whether parenting too should be understood and reclaimed as an ethical and political act; an act of shared motherings. For academic parents like us, such conversations could offer a credible counter-language in which the status and daily practice of parenting might serve as both a critique of, and an alternative to, the values of individualism, competition, and performance management promoted by the neoliberal academy. However, in order to serve as an affective counter-language any development of what we are calling a "feminist parental ethics" will need to offer a more inclusive and expansive notion of care that is able to navigate the residues of cultural anxiety still surrounding the supposed co-dependency associated with mothering and the maternal.

Here the work of Mary Phillips (2017) is instructive. Drawing on the principles, politics, and ethics of eco-feminism (Probyn, 2014; Warren, 2000), Phillips suggests that any relationship to the maternal should be understood within a wider ecological context of relationships with what she calls the "more-than-human." Rather than limiting notions of care to mother–child relations, instead we can locate care within complex networks of embodied interconnections with the many others that together make life possible. These others can be humans (adults and children), but they can also be materials, objects, technological devices, animals, plants, water, oxygen, all kinds of biochemical and energetic exchanges and interactions, bacteria, and of course, viruses. As we have discussed, so much of the parenting we have engaged in during our period of lockdown has involved the more-than-human. This is not just us and our two children, but the materials and systems that organize our homelife—the surfaces, technologies, objects, digital and paper documents, food, clothing, washing and laundry liquids, cars, shopping bags, hand gel, face masks, and more. Beyond the immediate home we could include our relationships with our extended family, the staff working at our local supermarket, the refuse collectors who take away our rubbish and recycling, the invisible networks of people, microchips, wires, servers, and screens that support our Internet connection, the trees, grass, and insects and animals we encounter in our garden and on our daily walks, and whose own labor maintains the plant life around us and the air we breathe. Most importantly at this historical moment, we must include within the more-than-human, the SARS-CoV-2 virus itself which has transformed (and tragically ended) the

lives of so many and whose own birth is so closely related to human activity (Carrington, 2020; Hayes, 2020). As Phillips (2017) argued:

> … a recognition of the embodiment and vulnerability that is shared by the more-than-human moves the focus of care away from a primary engagement with those deemed to be needy or dependent, such as the maternal relation to a child, to the interdependence of all beings on the planet. (p. 481)

For Phillips, an eco-feminism is an invitation to participate in and take responsibility for these wider ecological communities of care for the more-than-human and in which maternalism is but one expression of countless other relationships we are always already a part of. As Phillips (2017) argues, this more expansive notion of collective care also provides a potentially powerful means of challenging "the dead hand of neoliberalism" (p. 471) in that it provides the same kinds of counter-languages we have already discussed in terms of "articulation work," the non-market "diverse economies" we belong to, and the "small acts of care" we engage in. To belong to an ecological community reminds us of the urgent need to learn how to care for, but also to *care with*, those others with whom we share this planet (Tronto, 2013). This cannot be the patriarchal care-as-control as we have seen in the management of the virus by governments around the world by trying to dominate and beat it out of existence by force of will, the spraying of bleach across city streets and beaches, or presidential suggestions to inject disinfectant into the body (BBC News, 2020b). These are the reactionary tactics of the father in *Who's Your Daddy?* and as with the uncompliant infant in the video game, the virus may not care if a restaurant, shop, school, lecture theater, or university campus is categorized "Covid-secure." This all requires a radically different understanding of care in which we are not simply there to dispense care in any way we see fit. Indeed, it may well have been this desire to control our ecologies by micro-managing them, which gave rise to the conditions that created the virus and its means of spreading.

In contrast we could learn to embrace the "visceral," "damp," "fleshy," embodied, and uncertain relations of our ecological existence (Phillips, 2017, p. 477) and to take this sensibility into our academic working lives. To do so would immediately reveal some of the absurdities of placing value on individualized performance indicators, rankings, and league tables that determine worth as discrete units of production. The virus is a stark reminder that we can no longer "go it alone" and "look after number one." As Joan Tronto (2013, p. xiii) states, "political life [and we would add organizational life] is ultimately about the allocation of caring responsibilities." As the pandemic continues, the need to confront our mutual caring responsibilities *and* our shared vulnerabilities will be increasingly difficult to ignore. Yet as Phillips (2017, p. 478) asserts, as biophysical members of ecological communities, humans are very different to others and it is this respect for difference which is essential for the coexistence and flourishing of these ecologies.

With this in mind we conclude our article by considering the place of the parental within the ecological. As human parents with young children we are different members of our own ecological communities with our own unique biophysical potentialities, needs, and vulnerabilities. While Phillips (2017, p. 470) presents a challenging and necessary vision of the ecological, we also wonder if the move to offer a concept of care that encompasses, but is not reduced to, maternalism risks overlooking the value of the parental as a specific locus of care within these complex more-than-human relations. Having considered the various ways in which we as parents have had to navigate the complex webs of articulation work, neoliberal ideologies, enforced lockdowns and the innumerable more-than-humans that facilitate this, we have also seen how the unique relationship of care as mothering has been overlooked. Here we suggest that it may be useful to consider parenting as existing at the *intersection* between the maternal and the ecological. To parent, to give birth, and to bring forth is an ongoing ecological interaction, but it also requires *shared mothering* that is oriented towards certain *concrete others* within these ecologies (Benhabib, 1992; Phillips, 2017). It is the parental act of mothering, of nurturing, protecting, and providing space for moral development that creates new (and hopefully responsible and respectful) biophysical members within an ecological community. This act of bringing forth (of *parire*) is an important difference that parenting

represents. Most importantly, you do not need to have responsibility for children or to have given birth to a child in order to engage in parenting.

Working within this powerful notion of the ecological community, we ask how humans as biophysical members might act differently if we all were to see our collective role as that of the parent. However, as we have seen in both the video game example and in the conduct of some world leaders, parenting can be done very poorly. Parents can be brutal and cruel. To echo Tronto (2013), we are certainly not suggesting that we treat organizations or societies as metaphors for the family. Yet the ethical challenge remains: if parenting is something not reducible to relationships with our own children and is part of a wider ecology of care, then how do we parent ethically? For us, this points to the value of introducing a feminist parental ethics as a means of starting a conversation about care; a conversation that includes the maternal and the ecological, but one that also recognizes the value of the parental as a point of intersection between both. As Gibson-Graham noted:

> If politics involves taking transformative decisions in an undecidable terrain, ethics is the continual exercising of a choice to be/act/or think in certain ways. (Varela, 1992, cited in Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 618)

For us, the ability to learn how to make this choice is one of the most important responsibilities of parenting. To serve as examples (good and bad) for how to be/think/or act is the parent's responsibility—whether we choose to recognize this or not. These are the parental lessons we are teaching our own children everyday (even if they are not always the lessons that we think we are teaching!). It is this embodied interconnectivity with the parental that we as humans have and continue to be influenced by as we encounter new others to whom we may also turn to for the giving and receiving of parental care. Of course, what we are calling here the "parental" is but one small part of an ecological community, but we would argue that it is still a unique part. As we have seen with COVID-19, even very small things can contain within them the potential for catastrophic or enriching global change. Finally, as human members of more-than-human ecological communities, we should also be mindful of the psychic function that parenting serves in mediating our personal and collective experiences of the world we seek to care for. It is perhaps no coincidence that each of the classic schools of psychoanalysis place the figures of the mother and the father at the center of the human experience as a powerful force—for better or for worse—in influencing our early life and setting us on trajectories that may shape our own relationships for a lifetime (Benjamin, 1988, 1995).

By foregrounding a feminist parental ethics, we are proposing a means of working at this intersection of the maternal and the ecological/the human and the more-than-human, in order to navigate the undecidable terrain in which we must *be*, *think*, *and act*. For us, this started with our own experiences of being academic parents. Writing this article for "Feminist Frontiers" has been a valuable opportunity to think about what this has meant while living and working with our children during this global pandemic. The final and most challenging task that remains is moving from being and thinking to a means of acting. We invite the reader to consider what this might involve and leave you with some provocations from the ecology that we inhabit as two exhausted but optimistic academic parents:

To be

1. Be what Dar et al. (2020, p. 7) call a *good elder*, especially if you hold a position of authority over others: a custodian who commits to building and modelling "transformative spaces that, at least temporarily, level power dynamics among students, administrative staff and academics to create and cherish collective methodologies for survival."
2. Be the creative force that is needed to make visible the articulation work in your own and others' ecologies. Set up a network of parental activists, write a manifesto (Šimic & Underwood-Lee, 2017), take up spaces that ordinarily resist parental forms of care. When words fail, enact the embodied, relational aspects of articulation work.

To think

1. Think about caring responsibilities with students. Think and talk about care as part of classroom discussions; ask students about the relationship between care and gender, care and race, care and age. Invite students to explore the ecological communities that they belong to and the responsibilities they (may) have within them.
2. Reflect on caring responsibilities with family, friends, and especially colleagues. Ask others to think about care during meetings at work, perhaps as a regular agenda item, and be mindful of the responsibilities you have for the ecologies in which you participate.

To act

1. Take up the recommendation by Berg and Seeber (2016) to create a "holding environment," making space for those who have caring responsibilities or those who care about caring responsibilities to "vent" in a mutually safe environment.
2. Seek out space for children to disrupt, interrupt, and teach adults what care looks and feels like in the very professional and institutional spaces where children are not normally seen and heard.
3. Ask professional associations, accreditation bodies, and trade unions what they do to support the work of carers among their membership and how they address the structural inequalities that care produces.
4. Hold managers and those who have authority over you to account. Ask them about their own caring responsibilities and whether they feel that their needs are met. Offer them care.

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ENDNOTES

[1] *Who's Your Daddy?* is an independent video game first released on PCs and consoles in 2015 following a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign.

[2] See https://www.etymonline.com/search?q = parent

[3] OECD statistics based on time spent in unpaid, paid, and total work, by sex: https://www.oecd.org/gender/data/time-spent-in-unpaid-paid-and-total-work-by-sex.htm

[4] A situation highlighted in the report *Forced Out: The Cost of Getting Childcare Wrong* published in June 2020 by the UK Trades Union Congress (TUC). Here the disproportionate harm that the pandemic has on working families and working mothers was identified, with the report calling for urgent government intervention and investment. At the time of writing, no material steps have been taken by the UK government to address any of the report's recommendations.

[5] Thehistorian (2020).

[6] Similarly, Frederickson (2020) in *The Conversation* reports that preprint academic publications during the pandemic written by male authors far exceed those written by women—particularly for sole authored work.

[7] The concept of articulation work has been widely used in the study of computing and systems design for several decades to reconcile the disconnect between technological design and user interpretation. However, the concept has only

recently returned to sociological and organizational contexts through research such as Hampson and Junor's (2005) study of articulation work and emotional labor in the service industry.

[8] *Covid-19 Mutual Aid* is one such example of community-based organization that has emerged as a direct response to this pandemic based on the need to organize collective voluntary care for the other: https://covidmutualaid.org

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