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"What are you doing here, I thought you had a kid now?" The stigmatization of working mothers in academia – a critical self-reflective essay on gender, motherhood and the neoliberal academy.

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Abstract
The last decade has seen an increase of scholarly work within the social sciences critiquing neoliberal processes of our academic institutions. Much of this work has focused on metrics, paradoxes and politics. Few studies center on the effects of these processes for women only and where they do exist, they are primarily located within the fields of critical geography, sociology and feminist studies (Mountz et al. 2015; Caretta et al. 2018; Porter and Schänzel 2018; Cohen et al. 2020). In this paper, I argue that as scholars of language, we are lagging behind and it is high time to address the demands of our taxing institutions and international workplaces with regards to the implications and consequences they have for women and more specifically, early female career researchers who would like to combine motherhood with an academic career. I argue that we need to be seriously attuned to the effects and ramifications of motherhood and academia with the aim of correcting existing gendered biases, which requires an investment on the part of all stakeholders if change is to take place. As such, this work has personal, political and epistemological motivations and implications. By focusing primarily on women and my own personal experiences through auto-ethnography (Butz and Besio 2004; Le Roux 2017), this essay is concerned with knowledge production that deviates from masculine and heteronormative accounts (Gill 2012; Ozturk and Rumens 2014) within the academy. In these ways, this article contributes to recent work in the social sciences that that has been influenced by the 'emotional turn' (Gill 2012; Mountz et al. 2015; Mullings et al. 2016; Caretta et al. 2018) in order to "find ways to exist in a world that is diminishing" (Ahmed 2014).

KEY WORDS: motherhood, gender, neoliberal universities, early career researchers, auto-ethnography, stigma

"What are you doing here, I thought you had a kid now?" The stigmatization of working mothers in academia – a critical self-reflective essay on gender, motherhood and the neoliberal academy.[i]

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> woman seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and less selfishness […] woman, owing to her maternal instincts, displays these qualities toward her infants in an eminent degree; therefore it is likely that she would often extend them toward her fellow-creatures. Man is the rival of other men; he delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness.
>
> *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin (1871).

Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase of scholarly work within the social sciences critiquing neoliberal processes of our academic institutions. Much of this work has focused on metrics, paradoxes and politics. Few studies center on the effects of these processes for women only and where they do exist, they are primarily located within the fields of critical geography, sociology and unsurprisingly, feminist studies (Mountz et al. 2015; Caretta et al. 2018; Porter and Schänzel 2018; Cohen et al. 2020). As scholars of language, we are lagging behind and it is high time to address the demands of our taxing institutions and international workplaces with regards to the implications and consequences they have for women and more specifically, early female career researchers who would like to combine motherhood with an academic career. In drawing on auto-ethnography as a methodological tool (Butz and Besio 2004; Le Roux 2017), I write this essay with the hope of assisting other academics (both female and male) and bringing to light what many researchers may already know, but either do not openly acknowledge or explicitly address. This pertains to the socio-cultural realities and real-life challenges female academics who are (or would like to become) mothers face in the academy. I argue that we need to be seriously attuned to the effects and ramifications of motherhood and academia with the aim of correcting existing gendered biases, which requires an investment on the part of all stakeholders if change is to take place. As such, this work has personal, political and epistemological motivations and implications. By focusing primarily on women and my own personal experiences, this essay is concerned with knowledge production that deviates from masculine and heteronormative accounts (Gill 2012; Ozturk and Rumens 2014) within the

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Motherhood, parenthood and the neoliberal academy

In her book entitled, *All Joy and No Fun: the paradox of modern parenthood*, Senior (2014:4), found that "parents are no happier than non-parents, and in certain cases are considerably less happy". She accredits this to three main developments that have complicated the ways in which the experience of parenting has changed in the last few decades, namely: choice, our complicated work experiences and the redefinition of childhood. These developments have all led to the delineation of motherhood within the 21st century or what the French feminist philosopher Badinter (2012) describes as a *conflict* and how modern motherhood, undermines the status of women and ultimately results in various setbacks to women's freedom. For Badinter, this freedom is full of contradictions and "the individualism and hedonism that are hallmarks of our culture have become the primary motivations for having children, but also sometimes the reason not to" (2012: 2). Indeed independence and individuality are trademarks of neoliberal governance and progressive modern motherhood is no doubt linked to liberal feminist ideologies with roots in the US. For Angela McRobbie, a British sociologist, cultural theorist and feminist, progressive modern motherhood is also connected to the "neoliberal regime offering a distinctively gendered dimension to the mantra of individualism, the market and competition as well as updating the now old fashioned 'family values' vocabularies associated with social conservatism" (2013:121). For her, "female labour power is too important to the post-industrial economy for anyone to be advocating long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers" (2013:121). As more women entered the workforce from the mid 1970s onwards coupled with a high rate of divorce, "having a career does not just provide women with an income and independence, it also reduces the cost of welfare to government" (2013: 121). In 1975 in the US for example, 34% of women with children under the age of three were in the workforce. In 2010, this number increased to 61%. Such figures may indicate that both women and men are responsible for bringing home the bacon, but the majority of care, domestic or reproductive work, which includes cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry, child-rearing, etc. is still done primarily by women (Hochschild 1989; Romero et al. 2014; Gonçalves and Schluter 2017).

As female academics, we work in an extremely gendered workplace, where the playing field seems more like a battlefield at times and the competition is fierce. Of course it has not always been like this, but contemporary times in academia now call for drastic measures, where "efficiency, productivity, and excellence are the guiding principles" (Hartman and Darab 2012, as quoted in Mountz et al. 2015:1241) and metric-based regimes attempt to account for both actual and imaginary university time. In current neoliberal and capitalist institutions, academics are being turned into human capital (Berg et al. 2016) and people are no longer identified by name, but rather by their H-indexes and ORCID ID numbers. Furthermore, the processes of neoliberalization within academia "suggest that

auditing systems are key mechanisms that produce unhealthy levels of anxiety and stress in the academy" (Berg et al 2016, cf. Lesnick-Oberstein et al. 2015 for a discussion on anxiety and stress in academia). In their appeal for a 'slow scholarship movement' critical feminist geographers (Mountz et al. 2015) maintain that it is nearly impossible to resist neoliberal and elitist pressures within the academy, where high productivity is required, demanded and constantly evaluated and assessed usually within compressed time frames and for many academics, international mobility is an absolute must. So, how do we reconcile the demands on us as women of what is expected in our complicated and highly complex neoliberal institutions with the social and moral pressures and perhaps even the personal desires to procreate? According to Spitzmüller and Matthews:

> Across the globe, employees venture into a uniquely challenging life phase as they or their partners give birth to or adopt children. The transition from being an employee with no children to being an employee with children is profound, affecting both an employee's' work and personal spheres. […] Particularly women are faced with entirely novel psychological, physiological, social and economic considerations that apply uniquely to them as they transition to having and raising children (2016:1).

Indeed having and welcoming a child into one's life is an enormous decision and affects any parent or parents regardless of their sexual orientation. For working women and female academics in particular, especially those of child-bearing age, the outlook seems bleak depending on where you reside and work and what provisions (or lack thereof) are provided for you, your partner and family by certain policies at the federal or national level in order for a sustainable work-life balance to be maintained. According to Greenberg et al. (2016: 33) "the term "working mother" is a juxtaposition of oppositional language in which the social status, norms, and expected commitment of being a "good mother" are in direct conflict with the expectations of effort, competence, and authority that are required to be an "ideal worker"." Surely, we should know by now that talking in terms of anything *ideal*, human beings included, is pointless, since this presupposes a state of perfection, which is not only unattainable, but simply non-existent, much like Chomsky's (1965) highly criticized linguistic theory concerned with an 'ideal speaker-listener' in a homogeneous speech community. Excuse the cynicism, but a reality check is in order here. What second-wave feminism set out to do for women has inevitably backlashed resulting in post-feminism and its severe complexification (McRobbie 2004). For decades, women have been fighting for gender equality in many corners of the world. And while progress has indeed occurred, we will not experience 'true gender equality' in terms of social, political and economic recognition for women across the globe in my lifetime. In fact, according to The Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum 2018), the "global gender gap" will take another 108 years to close and "the most challenging gender gaps to close are economic and political empowerment dimensions, which are estimated to take 202 and 107 years to close respectively" (2018: viii). These are not exactly promising future prospects, but the sad and shocking reality for most working women globally. Indeed the discrepancies are large when we consider the socio-cultural, political and religious ideologies of specific cultures and post-industrial societies, many of which continue to keep women oppressed, subordinate and on the margins while others are more inclusive of their actual human rights.[ii] But for now, let us return to the discussion of working women and reproduction.

Working women and reproduction - not just an academic dilemma

Research has shown that there is an inevitable stigma for all women of child-bearing age associated with the intersection between pregnancy and work: the stigma of not wanting children, the stigma of not being able to have them, the stigma of being pregnant, the stigma of having an only child, and the stigma of being a working mother (Trump-Steele et al. 2016). In other words, this affects all women, mothers or not. The take home message is loud and clear. As for women, it does not matter what we do, which resonates particularly well with the English proverb 'damned if you do, damned if you don't'. For many women in the Western world and primarily as a result of second-wave feminism of the 1960s-1980s, women's rights and issues surrounding sexuality, reproduction, family and the workplace were brought to public attention and openly discussed with the aim of bringing about more gender equality and social change. With the introduction of contraception in the 1960s, women were given the choice of having children or opting out. If women decided to have them, hypothetically they could do so without necessarily sacrificing their jobs and possibly even careers. For women who opted out (and let us not forget women who could not biologically reproduce), one might think that the pressures and stigma of being childless was alleviated although in everyday practice, this is not the case (cf. Archetti, 2019).

For decades, women have been told, instructed and socialized into believing the circulating discourse and dominant ideology that if we work hard enough and make the *right* choices in a certain chronological order of course, then we can indeed "have it all" (Slaughter 2012), which usually translates into having a successful career and family life. This kind of discourse has been reproduced, mediated and mediatized for years and for your average privileged Western heterosexual white female, it sounds something like this: get an education, work hard and be successful in your job/career, become financially independent, travel and see the world, eventually meet someone, maybe get married, settle down and perhaps have children. I am well aware of how highly classed, elitist, privileged and problematic this all sounds, but I acknowledge that being in academia is being in a position of privilege that allows for a stimulating and flexible work environment, where we have the luxury and independence to choose our research interests and directions. Being a privileged, white middle-class, 'well'-educated female from the so-called 'global North' is also the only position from which I can honestly speak. That being said, my intention here is not to undermine any other women's experiences or choices regarding academia and/or motherhood nor is this narrative meant as an "outlet of complaint" (Caretta et al. 2018).

For young female researchers wanting to stay in academia and eventually start a family, the child-bearing age usually (but not always) coincides with the academic stage of the post-doc. For early career researchers (ECR) such as post-docs, the expectations of an academic career are according to Caretta et al. (2018:262) "multiple and demanding", which include but are not limited to:

> providing a multitude of measurable outputs and skills, publications, income generation through the acquisition of external grants, international collaboration, and teaching excellence, as well proving that one can do all these things in combination and at pace. For the period immediately following PhD conferral, one is considered an ECR and despite a nascent career trajectory, there is an implicit (and sometimes explicit)

expectation to produce multiple examples from the above list if one has any hope of retaining employability within the fiercely competitive academy.

While many post-doc positions are reserved for primarily research (with little teaching and administrative duties), they are precarious by nature in that they are unstable with a time limit of two-three years. That time frame is reserved for research and a high publication output in the hopes that a temporary post might lead to a permanent position. However, when that post-doc is female and her productive research time also happens to coincide with a desire to reproduce and start a family, work dilemmas emerge and major life decisions are addressed, which pertain first and foremost to female academics and less so to our male colleagues (although see Ladge et al. 2016; Mundy 2012; Burnett et al. 2011; Burnett et al. 2013 for a discussion on fatherhood and the workplace).

There is consistent theoretical and empirical evidence supporting the fact that pregnant women and mothers face prejudice, discrimination and stigma at all stages of the employment cycle, beginning with recruitment, selection, negotiation, promotion, retention, and leadership (Sabat et al. 2016: 10). Several theoretical models have been proposed to explain these processes which include stigma theory, the Stereotype Content Model, social role theory, and role congruity theory to name but a few (Sabat et al. 2016). In our 'gendered' cultures (Baxter 2003; Wagner and Wodak 2006) and let's face it, in many academic traditions, women are made to feel that if they choose to have children, then they are 'not serious', less committed to their careers and even regarded as less competent. This is known as the "motherhood penalty" (Diem-Wille 1996), which shows that across cultures in the West, mothers are disadvantaged in the labor market compared to women without children and men as a result of both "normative discrimination" and the "motherhood wage penalty" (Budig and England 2001), i.e. mothers earn significantly less than men and women without children. Unsurprisingly, such discrimination does not hold true for men, who get the so-called "paternal boost" or "fatherhood bonus" when they become dads (Sabat et al. 2016:12).

So, as women and academics and especially to those of childbearing age who would actually like to have children and a future academic career, what hope do we have and how realistic is it to combine motherhood with a career in academia? I have thought long and hard about these questions for years in fact and spoken to many female academics from different fields primarily within the social sciences about their own experiences. I have met women who persevered as a single parent with twins to women who set their alarm clocks at 4 am in order to get some writing done before their official mothering duties began. I have met 'mature' academics, who raised up to four children before beginning their PhDs and women who obtained a PhD and stayed in academia while raising children with disabilities. There are women who rely on a supportive extended family network and functional state welfare provisions. I have also spoken to women who informed me about their flexible partners and spouses who equally divided parenting duties, while a handful of women explained that their partners were the main caregiver. I have also met women with PhDs who gave up their careers to become full-time mothers and support their academic partners. I have yet to meet a man who has done this. Most of these tales are inspiring ones of female academics who have been successful at combining motherhood with an academic career. What I have also heard and seem to be coming across more frequently these days are concerns being voiced by early female career researchers who feel like they have to make a choice, either opting for motherhood *or* an academic career.

I know this dilemma all too well as a mid-career researcher (MCR) for I too was at the crossroads nearly a decade ago weighing out the options feeling like these two distinct roles were completely incompatible.

I was never (and will most likely never be) one to wake up at 4 am to write, but I do rely on good state welfare provisions, a supportive extended family network that also includes an au pair as well as engaging in the reversal of traditional heteronormative gender roles with my husband. As such, I can speak of my own subjective experiences and can offer my own narrative and self-reflections with the hope that it may be supportive to younger female academics to know that as a woman and mother in academia, one can excel in both roles and that they are not in fact mutually exclusive. Moreover, there is never just one single academic career trajectory, but more possibilities and opportunities than one might think. That being said, I also write this essay without the platform of a stable or permanent academic position and I have no idea where I will end up once my current post-doc fellowship ends.

Modern transformations of family, marriage and children - the commodification of motherhood

In discussing the transformations of our world (and the impact of globalization), which extend beyond the economic just shortly after the turn of the century, social theorist Anthony Giddens accounted for the changes affecting our personal and emotional spheres that reach "far beyond the borders of any particular country" (2003:52), where we find "parallel trends almost everywhere, varying only in degree and according to the cultural context in which they take place" (2003:52). In fact, Giddens states that:

> among all the changes going on in the world, none is more important than those happening in our personal lives – in sexuality, relationships, marriage and the family. There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others. It is a revolution advancing unevenly in different regions and cultures, with many resistances (2003:51).

Perhaps one of these resistances is opting out of the traditional family, "where the inequality of men and women was intrinsic" (2003: 54), a point we know from the early work of Durkheim on domestic injustices and *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933). In many Western societies, the traditional family has and continues to be replaced by the rise of the couple and *coupledom*, what Giddens refers to as a *shell institution*: "they are called the same, but inside their basic character has changed" (2003:58). Indeed, long are the days in many Western cultures, where marriages are arranged and formed based on primarily socio-economic terms although this is still the case in many parts of China and India today. According to historian Stephanie Coontz (2005), the institution of marriage was transformed in the 19th century when people began to marry due to personal relationships and for reasons of love rather than for purely economic means. But as Coontz maintains, "many cultures still frown on placing love at the center of marriage" (2005: 18). Just as the traditional family was regarded differently in pre-modern times, so too were children. In fact, children were seen as 'workers' contributing to the family unit especially within agricultural societies and contexts (Giddens 2003; Senior 2014). Today, children have many rights and are regarded as individuals in their own right. Within the context of contemporary American culture, Senior (2014:7) maintains that

adults often view children as one of life's crown achievements, and they approach child-rearing with the same bold independence and individuality that they would any other ambitious life project, spacing children apart according to their own needs and raising them according to their own individual child-rearing philosophies.

The market is currently saturated with books informing both women and men how to be good, modern and attentive (yet not overbearing) parents, but especially mothers most likely because women are still regarded as the primary caregiver due to the fact that we are the ones biologically capable and physiologically equipped for incubating a growing human fetus. In fact, for some time now, there seems to be an obsession with reproduction, representation and the selling of parenthood primarily for the benefit of governments and nation-states especially those experiencing low birth rates (cf. Lazar 2000 for a discussion in Singapore) who even offer financial rewards and other incentives for their nationals to procreate (i.e. the case with Australia about 10 years ago). In an attempt to showcase parenthood as an achievable goal that everyone wants and should not miss out on, parenthood, but I would argue, more specifically, motherhood, has been and continues to be commodified (Neal 2011) just like any other resource, material or place since the inception of neoliberal politics in the late 1970s. For middle and upper class mothers in the 21st century in the Western world, motherhood has been deemed as a "competitive sport" (Martin 2009; Senior 2014), where terms such as *natural* and *organic* infiltrate daily conversations among expectant and new moms (Trinch and Snajdr 2018). For Badinter (2012:X), "the reverence for all things natural glorifies an old concept of the maternal instinct and applauds masochism and sacrifice constituting a supreme threat to women's emancipation and sexual equality". The old concept of the maternal instinct which is what Darwin discussed in *The Descent of Man* and included at the beginning of this paper may be outdated, but ironically seems to be very much alive in the ways that women and especially mothers are viewed and treated within contemporary patriarchic structures. The belief that women but especially mothers are selfless, nurturing, self-sacrificing and caring rather than having qualities such as assertiveness, ambition, perseverance or dominance (associated with stereotypical masculine qualities) feed into these historically entrenched hegemonic ideologies, which continue to influence how women (mothers or not) are perceived and treated not only in the workplace, but society at large (Benard and Correll 2010; Sandberg 2013; Spitzmüller and Matthews 2016; Denmark and Paludi 2018; Whippman 2019)[iii]. Indeed all-consuming motherhood, intensive mothering/parenting and excessive child-centeredness have all increased within the last decade (Douglas and Michaels 2005; Loke et al. 2011) and no doubt resulted from capitalist and neoliberal maneuvers that emphasize individuality, self-governance, entrepreneurship and perhaps, most evidently, "the acid bath of competition" (Beck 1986:94).

Career suicide, part-time motherhood and the reversal of traditional heteronormative gender roles – the future for academic mothers?

Today, I have a five and a half-year old daughter and had her by means of a caesarian when I was 35 years old, which was (and still is) considered to be a 'high risk' pregnancy due to confounding factors such as parity, pre-existing gestational diabetes mellitus and hyperextension (Jolly et al. 2000). I was a stay at home mother for an entire year after my

daughter's birth, which was somewhat unconventional in Switzerland, where I worked at the time and even more so in the States where I was born and raised. I faced a barrage of inappropriate questions and comments such as "was it planned?" as if I had made a huge and irreversible mistake that was not only incompatible with an academic career, but a life decision I might actually regret (cf. Donath's 2015 and 2017 study on regretting motherhood among Israeli women). Despite my decisions, many believed I was committing 'career suicide' (Greenberg et al. 2009) by choosing to have a child in the first place and then compounding it by taking a voluntary 12-month maternity leave. Surely, many thought that I was willingly forfeiting any chances of staying in "the game" hence the title of this paper, "what are you doing here, I thought you had a kid now?" which were words uttered to me by a female colleague and peer who does not have children at an international conference that was held in Hong Kong in 2015 that I attended solo despite the fact that I was still breast-feeding at the time. There were no congratulatory remarks or informal small talk, but just another interrogation about my lifestyle choices as a female academic and new mother. I was shocked but so was she apparently to see that despite my career hiatus, I was still in "the game". Perhaps this is because I did not use my maternity leave to write a book or publish papers like some women do. I had no desire, energy nor the mental capacity for that matter to do so. I was overwhelmed with my new life, lack of sleep and coming to terms with conflicting identities pertaining to both the personal and the professional.

Becoming a new mother does initially mean a loss of autonomy and independence. It is the loss of your old life and former body, where a new life phase begins and becomes completely re-configured that absolutely no person and no book for that matter can prepare you for. Because women and men are waiting longer to have children these days, Senior maintains that:

> the consequence of this deferment is a heightened sense of contrast - before versus after. These parents now have an exquisite memory of what their lives were like before their children came along. They spent roughly a decade on their own, experimenting with different jobs, romantic partners and living arrangements. (2014:19).

This "heightened sense of contrast" is by all means a modern phenomenon and one previous generations cannot relate to, but what current and future parents are facing and will continue to face as a result of the cultural emphases on individualization (Beck 1986; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). For Beck, as soon as one enters the labor market, they are inevitably faced with mobility and "removed from traditional patterns and arrangements" (1986:94). Indeed, re-entering the labor market in order to stay in academia for me meant eventually relocating to a different country on my own without my family as my husband is not mobile with his business.

Currently, my daughter stays in Austria with my husband while I commute from Norway and as such, I engage in 'part-time' motherhood and "mobile intimacies" (Elliott and Urry 2010:85), which is perhaps another unconventional thing that I do, where I have and continue to receive inappropriate remarks from all sorts of people. In fact, just about everyone seems to have an opinion on this, but especially women who accentuate on "how hard" this arrangement must be for me and my daughter often leaving my husband out of the equation entirely. Well, it isn't, at least not anymore, and this response leaves most people speechless for they aren't quite sure how to classify me. If I were a man, I doubt

this issue would be worth commenting on let alone a topic to be discussed at length. Being an academic and commuter mom means I fall into the category of 'hypermobile' – a term reserved primarily for business types (Frändberg and Vilhelmson 2003; Elliott and Urry 2010; Gonçalves 2018), which I can attest to as the planes I board and disembark are largely filled with men in suits. So while this kind of mobility has become part of our family's norm and whether I am in Oslo doing research or in Auckland, Cape Town or Rio de Janeiro at an international conference does not make much of a difference in terms of physically being away from my family.[iv] However, I would argue that this kind of mobility and part-time mothering is still very much perceived as rather unexpected because I am a woman, because I am a mother and because I have a young child.

Being a part-time and commuter mom no doubt comes at a cost, financially, socially, physically, psychologically and emotionally. I miss out on chunks of my daughter's life, which I can never get back. And while digital technology allows keeping in touch possible and regular, it does not always work and most of my salary is reserved for purchasing airfare and maintaining a second household. And let's not forget that being hypermobile is also physically and psychologically draining. But, being a part-time mom also has its advantages. It allows me the freedom and independence of my 'old life' giving me the time to focus on my work and also have some time for myself, what many working mothers (and fathers) do not have. This is what Nigerian feminist scholar Adichie refers to as "a full person" (2017:9). Engaging in these lifestyle, work and mothering choices is only possible because of a) my current workplace and b) stepping down as being the main manager of our family (another neoliberal tactic).

Working in Norway has been and continues to be a rewarding experience not only because I currently work at a research center of excellence, but Norway is a model welfare-state like most Scandinavian countries (Brandth and Kvande 2002; Lammi-Taskula 2006; Ellingsæter and Leira 2006), where state provisions and policy designs are gender egalitarian (Ray et al. 2010) and make it both possible and affordable (with subsidized public day care facilities) for both women and men to work, have families and be entitled to parental leave and benefits.[v] These social policies on the national level trickle down into the institutional level, where effective workplace family policies are the norm. What is more, I work in a female-dominated workplace, where most senior scholars have children and who support and advocate on behalf of women and mothers, and are empathetic and flexible of my current commuting lifestyle.

Engaging in my current commuting lifestyle at 'home' with my family has meant retiring from 'family manager' meaning that I have had to learn to let go, disengage with micro-management (to a certain degree) and at times, just simply keep my mouth shut trusting and knowing that my husband will and is also perfectly capable of getting the job done without me. I will admit, this was not easy especially at the beginning; however, it has been extremely liberating as our current situation has forced us or perhaps even invited us to both challenge and also take up the challenge and live out the reversal of traditional heteronormative gender roles, which works very well for us and one I would highly recommend. This means shaking off anxious feelings of guilt, not apologizing for working and rejecting the language of *help* (Adichie 2015). In these ways, I do not regard my husband necessarily as *helping* me with our daughter, but recognize that he is doing his fair share and if we really want gender equality to exist and fathers to do their fair share at home, this means letting them do it their way and on their own terms without interfering.

Having my husband take responsibility and be the main caregiver of our daughter means that I am still in "the game". While he is often perplexed by how the game is sometimes played like most outsiders (Peseta et al. 2017) and he does not fully comprehend the pressure I (and my colleagues) are under to constantly and consistently perform like stellar academic athletes or "superheroes" (Pitt and Mewburn 2016), our choices and contemporary lifestyle have allowed us both to continue our careers while raising a child in the 21st century where family, gender roles, motherhood and the neoliberal academy are being questioned, critiqued and re-evaluated.

To briefly conclude; if we want women to advance in academia, especially early career researchers (and those who would like to become mothers one day), we need to be aware and fight against overt and covert discrimination, stigmatization and sexism in the workplace rather than becoming or remaining perpetuators of such processes. We need to be attuned to the highly problematic practices of gender biases in our daily workplaces and academic institutions (many of which in my experience are bewilderingly feminine-gendered) and take them seriously.[vi] This requires a collective effort on our part as women (both mothers and childfree) as well as men and an investment on the part of all stakeholders within the academy. We need to not only voice our concerns and bring them to the fore, but advocate on behalf of mothers, fathers and their families (whatever the latter term may mean these days), and demand change in order to bring about more caring and understanding work cultures in the form of gender egalitarian and progressive organizational and flexible work policies at the departmental, faculty and university levels. This means we need to mobilize and take a bottom-up approach. For only with such change and support, will we be able to promote and maintain a healthy and productive work-life balance in the future that is actually sustainable. If we fail, we risk the chance of missing out on research excellence and young female talent especially from early career researchers who are dedicated, ambitious, innovative, highly competent and skilled, and perhaps one day in the future, also mothers.

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[i] Parts of this paper were presented at the Sociolinguistics Symposium 22 in Auckland, New Zealand 2018 in a panel entitled, "Narratives of Motherhood" with contributions by Monica Heller, Cristina Higgens, Kaz Matsumoto, Amiena Peck, Linnea Hanell and Elizabeth Lanza. I would like to thank several people for their encouragement and support regarding this panel, namely, Patricia Lamarre, Adam Jaworski, Crispin Thurlow, and to Stephan May and his local organizing committee for providing us with the space to discuss these issues openly and critically.

[ii] I am thinking here of New Zealand's current female prime minister Jacinda Ardern, who gave birth while in office in June 2018 (and was questioned about her choice on national TV by a male journalist) or of women in Saudi Arabia, who were just recently granted the right to have driving licenses.

[iii] In a recent New York Times article, Whippman questions the assertiveness movement and a male defined value system. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/10/opinion/sunday/feminism-lean-in.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage

[iv] Elliott and Urry (2010: 85) talk about 'commuter marriages' and 'distance relationships' as "a kind of normative model of intimate relationships in the twenty-first century", but their discussion does not thoroughly address or problematize the notion of 'families' and how this concept needs to be re-conceptualized within contemporary society.

[v] For example, parental leave gives parents 49 weeks at 100 % coverage or 59 weeks at 80 % coverage with parents choosing the same degree of coverage (www.nav.no).

[vi] Most of the negative comments I have received about being a commuting mother and academic have come from women.