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Publish or parent: Reflective, creative work on the cost of parenting for female academics pre-, mid- and post- the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Despite the change over time in academia's gender profile, educationalists Bradley and Oldham (2020) challenge what they perceive to be the perpetuation of "gendered norms of productivity and the mythical notion of work-life balance". Bradley and Oldham (2020) argue that these concepts "endlessly complicate the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the female academic's success" and take the position that "[w]omen cannot give in to this concept of two separate worlds, which splinters the self". They propose a reflective practice that prompts female academics to "claim our entire personhood, professional and parent if we are to seek freedom from feeling 'torn' between these spheres".

As a mother, and in response to my sense of feeling 'splintered' and 'torn' between parental, personal and institutional measures of success, I created a series of artefacts that recognise my personhood as a professional and a parent, consciously trying to repair the divide between these two spheres of my identity. This work was displayed in 2022 as part of a group exhibition at the University of Johannesburg FADA Gallery. I created three densely designed aprons and a tablecloth imprinted with text and imagery extracted from to-do lists in notebooks — from 2019 to 2022 — and drawings by myself and my young daughter. The lists were a reflective record of pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic times and proved poignant and sobering. In addition to the realities of parenting from home, they encapsulated exhausting 'invisible' professional responsibilities, such as supporting first-generation university students, departmental housekeeping, community engagement, extensive teaching hours within an under-staffed department and some dogged attempts to find focused time to engage in research. The printed artefacts were displayed in conjunction with 3D 'creative outputs' constructed with my daughter. Viewed as a whole, the installation evoked the struggles experienced by academic mothers worldwide when two separate identities, academic and parent, were unexpectedly forced to fill the same space during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As an extension and explication of the gallery installation, this paper explores the challenges of female academics who are also mothers and who argue for a more empathetic perspective on the impact of hybrid teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. I reflect on my creative output and my personal experience as a dedicated mother, academic, teacher, and partner of a medical practitioner who is a frontline worker. Whereas recent international studies primarily focus on the roles and expectations of female academics during the COVID-19 pandemic, my contribution sets out to engage with this conversation specifically from a South African design lecturer's point of view within the incredibly

harsh South African lockdown. It provides insights from my creative work concerning greater inclusivity and support within academia.

Keywords: Auto-ethnography, gendered workspace, invisible work, multimodal identities, practice-based research.

Cutting the cloth

The precarious balance between parenthood and academia is not a new concern: as far back as 2009, Hirakata and Daniluk reflected on the struggles of academic mothers with young children. The research team identified a conflict between family and work as the main reason for the poor retention of female academics (Hirakata et al. 2009, p. 284). Hirakata et al. (2009, p. 284) indicated that female academics with children publish less research, impacting promotion opportunities.

More recently, Bowyer et al. (2021, p. 311) reiterate that, compared to childless and male colleagues, "academic mothers suffer far more difficulties in their bid to juggle family and parenting commitments with a broad range of academic work across teaching, research, and service". Bradley and Oldham (2020, p. 86) highlight that these gendered disparities in research performance, measured by publications and grants, are further impacted by "teaching and mentoring, service loads and gendered division of labour within households". This 'invisible service work' refers to marketing, participating in industry events, competition entries, and offering support and care work to students and colleagues. According to Bird, Litt and Wang (2004, p. 230), invisible service work hampers promotion opportunities and "faculty who devote considerable time to service work are likely penalised in their efforts to achieve tenure and promotion". Magoqwana et al. (2020, p. 11) argue that, within neoliberal South African universities that focus on research outputs and throughput rates, there is more pressure on female than male staff members to provide care and service work for "customers" to improve throughput.

Following a 2007 study on South African academic mothers, Pillay (2012, p. 142) concluded that a balance between the two identities of a mother and an academic is impossible. Pillay (2012, p. 142) posits that "motherhood appears to imply feelings of guilt [...] [that are] externally created and perpetuated as well as internally reinforced". Participants in Pillay's study could only achieve a semblance of balance through a division of physical spaces, clearly allocated blocked-off time or even a debriefing activity – such as driving home – between the two roles of mother and academic (Pillay 2012, p. 146).

This conflict between an academic career, invisible service work and motherhood became even more pronounced in the first quarter of 2020 with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, separation by time and space became impossible, forcing academic mothers to work later into the night to handle increased work responsibilities (Kriger 2022, p. 145); these experiences were well-documented, nationally and internationally (Bowyer et al. 2021, Walters et al. 2022, Kriger et al. 2022, Okeke-Uzodike 2021, Makhura 2022, Pereira 2021, Ciu 2021).

In April 2020, after a brief hiatus in response to a world brought to a sudden lockdown, my university, department, and I set to work. The goal was simple: Assist all students, no matter their circumstances, to participate and succeed in the academic programme. Practical contact classes moved online immediately. We became cloistered in our houses, joined by our families. My university requested reams of data at short notice, expecting instant responses on students' connectivity, technical ability, home-life situations, and participation in the programme. My colleagues and I worked day and night, coming to grips with online teaching, attending online meetings, writing reports, uplifting fellow staff

members, and following up on deeply anxious and missing students. The strain was compounded by caring for my daughter — often on my own — cooking, cleaning, and navigating an uncertain present and future as my partner risked his health as a frontline medical practitioner. Bowyer et al. (2021, p. 331) affirm that this "rapid transition to online learning, coupled with school shutdowns, created a double shift for many women whereby academic and family responsibilities not only increased but had to be met simultaneously. As teaching and service loads increased exponentially alongside our caring roles, it was very much the research elements of our careers that suffered".

Walters et al. (2022, p. 143) administered an online questionnaire and open-ended narrative account of home life during the 2020 lockdown, from 1 July to 30 September, to 2 018 female academics at 26 South African Universities. Since the results of this collaborative project indicated that having young children at home was the most important variable affecting the academic work of mothers during the lockdown, Kriger (2022, p. 143) drafted a paper, based on this data, that specifically addresses responses from female academics with preschool children. The most striking finding was that "(h)aving young children at home had a direct influence on the levels of stress and the availability of working time for the participants in this study" (Kriger 2022, p. 145).

This finding validated my sense of two separate identities, academic and mother, unexpectedly forced to fill the same space, as experienced by academic mothers worldwide. In 2022, contact classes resumed as if past efforts had not happened. Internationally, there had been an increase in research productivity overall but a clear decrease in female-authored papers (Ciu et al. 2021, p. 3).

After two tumultuous, unbalanced years, I researched national and international studies on academic motherhood to deal with my sense of fragmentation. Inspired by the findings of fellow academics, I created a series of artefacts that recognise my personhood as a professional and a parent, consciously trying to repair the divide between these two spheres of my identity. This installation was displayed in 2022 as part of a group exhibition at the University of Johannesburg FADA Gallery. When writing my artist statement (Maart 2022, pp. 130-131), I could, therefore, align my subjective, creative work with national and international studies on academic motherhood during 2020 and 2021.

Artist's statement: Voorskoot 1

In response to my sense of feeling 'splintered' and 'torn' between parental, personal and institutional measures of success, in an act that recognises both my personhood as a professional and a parent by repairing the divide between these spheres of my identity, I created a series of three densely designed aprons and a table cloth from accumulated to-do lists and sketches by myself and my daughter taken from my notebooks from 2019 to 2022. 'Voorskoot' is the Afrikaans translation for an apron. These aprons are exhibited along with other relevant artefacts and a range of 'creative outputs' by myself and my daughter. The work serves as a "reflective checklist" (Bradley & Oldham 2020), visualising the choices, priorities, so-called invisible work and engagements in the many worlds I traverse daily as a parent, partner, professional and academic. Like an apron, these roles are worn, sullied, removed,

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¹ Voorskoot: Afrikaans for 'apron'. The term, in Afrikaans, literally means 'something that is placed in front of the lap'. The traditional definition of voorskoot in the Verklarende Afrikaanse Woordeboek (Kritzinger, Labuschagne & De Villiers Pienaar 1959, p. 737) reads as follows: [L]os oorkleed wat dames veral voorhang om hulle klere tuis teen vuiligheid te beskerm (Loose overgarment that especially ladies hang in front to protect their clothing from dirt in the home). Reference to gender and domesticity is absent in the current Wikipedia definition of the Afrikaans term (Voorskoot 2021). Still, the image demonstrating the garment's usage depicts two dames (ladies) working in a kitchen. Kritzinger et al. (1959, p. 573) note that skoot can also signify the womb. Thus, the term voorskoot is saturated with references to female domesticity.

washed, and then again hung on the wall, ready for another day of service. An apron is used to protect, keep clean, and take on a role.

By incorporating my to-do lists, the main method to help me remember tasks and expectations, I show there is little balance or separation between the home and the career of an academic mother. As a mother, one is everything to everyone and little to oneself. The aprons symbolise the roles and layers one has to assume as a parent and academic, leaving little to no space for other pursuits. My numerous to-do lists from the past years, spanning pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic, proved quite poignant and sobering. The lists encapsulated, along with parenting from home, a long list of so-called 'invisible work' such as student applicant portfolio reviews and departmental marketing tasks, service work such as mentoring and supporting struggling first-generation university students, departmental housekeeping and administration, extensive teaching hours within an under-staffed department and dogged attempts to find some focused time to do research.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, I often felt like the boundaries between my many roles had been destroyed, with expectations that I teach online, whilst in an online meeting, whilst trying to take care of a young child who does not understand why I am ignoring her. Our university's Psychological office attempted to give struggling staff counselling, but this was pointless as the problem was not emotional or mental but unable to take on many different roles simultaneously. At the end of one institutional questionnaire to find out how the university's psychological services could help, I had to conclude that nothing might lighten these many burdens except at least recognition of the difficulties academic mothers experienced and the impact this has had on our career trajectories. I created a tablecloth and aprons from my lists because of this experience to show that my (and many other colleagues') service and care work protected my child, department and students but felt invisible and taken for granted by university management and society.

The 'creative outputs' on display symbolise the time-consuming role of a parent in trying to create an enriched life for a child. I have placed them on a low plinth so the viewer has to look down on them. It often feels that even having a child, much less spending time bringing up said child, is generally looked down upon by neo-liberal university management. According to Bowyer (2021), "academic mothers suffer far more difficulties in their bid to juggle family and parenting commitments with a broad range of academic work across teaching, research, and service than their male and non-parenting counterparts". However, each humble little work on this plinth symbolises value, love and care in developing a young mind. No one but myself and my daughter may appreciate its meaning, but it is ours.

Stitching the cloth

I applied practice-led research and the aesthetico-action research cycle as the basis of my methodology when crafting this exegesis of my 2022 creative output, *Voorskoot*. According to Marshal (2010, p. 78), "reflexive practice is characterised by the thoughtful coming together of critical reflections and actions that bring to light or mirror the underpinnings in our practice concerning our assumptions, biases, and perspectives". An exegesis, or critical interpretation, is the written component of a visual arts enquiry, which takes shape in conjunction with the creative output (Marshall 2010, p. 78). This paper and my 2022 artist's statement above provide the context for the installation and situate it within a greater body of research, namely Critical Feminist Theory.

Rust et al. (2007, p. 11), in *Pratice-led research in art, design and architecture,* define Practice-led research as an original investigation undertaken to gain new knowledge partly employing creative practice and the outcomes of that practice. Rust et al. (2007, p. 10) state that "practice-led, does not describe a single set of ideas about research. Its meaning varies with discipline, location, and person and it varies with the questions that are investigated".

The Aesthetico-Action Research Cycle entails four consecutive stages, namely Observation, Reflection, Planning, and Action, before the cycle restarts (Marshall 2010, p. 81). My Observation entailed gathering and analysing my notebooks and individual experiences and reviewing relevant literature. This initial formative stage preceded my reflection on the literature, documentation and lived experiences in my artist statement. The third stage, Planning, consisted of reviewing all the visual data from my notebooks and creative outputs made with my daughter through the lens of the literature review to propose feasible creative methods that best encapsulate my argument, namely that there is no perfect balance between an academic career and motherhood and that this precarious imbalance was severely disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This step preceded the Action of creating the output. After its creation and setup, the creative output was again Observed, Reflected on (by the artist, reviewers and viewers), followed by Planning for the textual output or exegesis, written up as the next Action in a retrospective analysis (Marshall 2010, p. 81).

I link my installation with the feminist guiding principle that 'the personal is political'. Rogan et al. (2018, p. 132) summarise this Second Wave feminist principle, first coined by Hanish in an essay by the same title in 1970, as:

A product of patriarchal power relations [that] extended the definition of politics to areas of everyday life formerly trivialised and understood as natural, [and thus] challenged conventional norms that defined political action [...] that allowed women to discover the political nature of their experiences as the foundation for activism.

The feminist principle 'the personal is political', quoted from Harris and Gonzales (2017, p. 4) in Magoqwana et al. (2020, p. 9) encourages women and other marginalised groups to speak out, as "personal stories are symptomatic of a larger structural problem and thus well placed to facilitate broader political discussion". Thus, my personal experience, encapsulated in my notebooks and creative tasks with my daughter, as confirmed by the data collected by the studies listed above, takes on a feminist political lens.

Crafting Voorskoot (2022)

I started the creative project by reviewing my three notebooks from 2019 until mid-2022. I take these A5 books everywhere during my multi-faceted day to take notes of meetings, draft a bi-weekly to-do list, write observations, and draw patterns, objects and calming mandalas. I often revisit the patterns and mandalas until they cover a full page, as drawing helps me focus during long and complicated meetings. However, my notebooks are not fully mine alone, as my daughter has, since the age of about 3, been stealing them at first and later asking for them outright to draw during times waiting for appointments, boredom or even just whilst travelling with me by car. As such, my notebooks also contain a timeline of her creative development, from rough mark-making (Figure 1) to loose and, of late, more developed figures from her life and imagination (Figure 2).

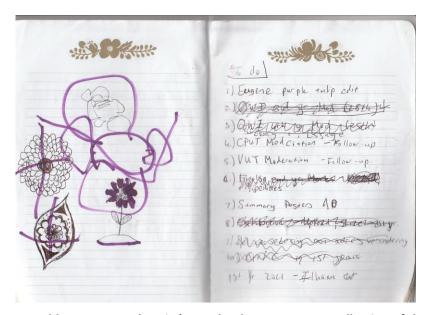


Figure 1: Double-page spread, artist's notebook, August 2020, collection of the artist

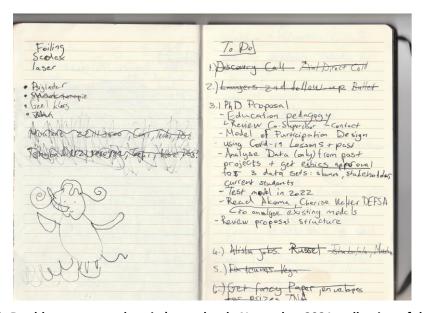


Figure 2: Double-page spread, artist's notebook, November 2021, collection of the artist

After reviewing the content from the three books, I scanned all the pages. The coloured scans were placed in three square grid layouts, one per year, of 62.5mm x 62.5 mm blocks on a 1.7 x 1.3-metre page on InDesign. For ethical reasons, when arranging these images, I took special care to crop out any personal information, phone numbers or identifiers of students, friends, or colleagues. After selecting an appropriate rough-textured fabric to print the design, I sent the three layouts to a digital fabric printer, Dunamis Textile Printers. The printed material was used to make up three aprons (Figure 5) and, with the assistance of Nhantsike Apparel, based in Westdene, Johannesburg, the remaining fabric was combined into a three-panelled tablecloth (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Simple wooden pegs from which to suspend the aprons were chosen to match the overall nature of the exhibition, with a focus on natural, homely materials.

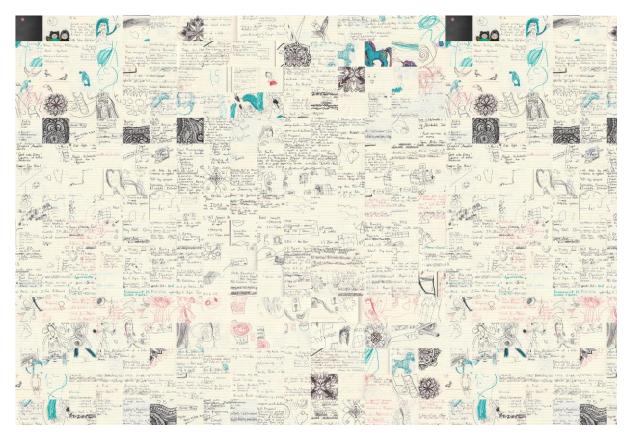


Figure 3: The 2021 layout, document in the writer's possession

I reviewed my and my daughter's crafting projects scattered throughout our home to identify appropriate projects for the exhibition installation, which was curated as a final work by the gallery's curator and a colleague with knowledge of the project.



Figure 4: Three close-ups of the tablecloth and creative outputs, photos by Sarah de Pina 2022



Figure 5: The final setup of Voorskoot, photo by Sarah de Pina 2022

The final installation (Figure 5) also included the three original worn notebooks inserted in the pockets of the hanging aprons, although viewers were not encouraged to interact with the books. Each strip of fabric was aligned with its apron and notebook on display. The creative pieces were randomly scattered across the tablecloth.

Die tafeldoek

Understanding my work wearing my apron of motherhood

The Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group (SSFNRI Group), based at Humbolt State, California, USA (2017, p. 231), states that, along with invisible service work within the academy, women usually do more invisible work within their homes. Academic mothers have had to adjust their work programme according to that of their children, limiting research time. The group concludes that this illustrates that academic women who have families are thus double penalised (SSFNRI Group 2017, p. 231). As mentioned, all tertiary education programmes were thrown in disarray during the pandemic, with teaching and childcare, and after-hours administration and student care work becoming my more crucial work. Mirick and Wladkowski (2018, p. 264) state that within academia, there is a general institutional attitude that the role of motherhood is secondary to academic careers and that academic mothers are discouraged from speaking about their roles as mothers and how it interferes with their jobs.

Thus, the 'creative outputs' on display symbolise the time-consuming role of a parent in trying to create an enriched life for a child. I placed them on a low plinth so the viewer has to look down on

them, as it often feels to me that the act of even having a child, much less spending time bringing up said child, is generally looked down upon by neo-liberal university management. However, each humble little work on this plinth symbolises value, love, and care in developing a young mind. No one but my daughter and I may appreciate its value, but it represents precious time spent together, which, in retrospect, I view as a calm space of creativity and growth in a world gone mad.

Understanding my work through the eye of the needle of academia

The process of creating this installation proved to be quite empowering. My literature review before creating the work, my portfolio of evidence on display and the further research conducted for this paper gave me a sense of vindication. The experience of my boundaries being torn and frayed from working from home while caring for my child and students was a terrifying experience that occasionally gives me flashbacks of anxiety and frustration. In order to have this confirmed by other academics in their qualitative studies and by further quantitative studies came as a relief. However, this confirmation also adds sadness for time lost and time with my child not being appreciated by myself.

Understanding my work as an invisible tablecloth

I created a tablecloth and aprons from my lists because of this experience to show that my and many other colleagues' service and care work protected my child, department and students but was invisible and taken for granted. According to the SSFNRI Group (2017, p. 229), female academics often do the necessary but invisible labour, such as student care work, administrative tasks, meetings and social events, which are 'coded feminine' and less valued than research publications and grants. Teaching is a personal passion of mine, and within a South African context, it is crucial and presumed to a university's purpose. However, according to the SSFNRI Group, teaching has become another form of invisible work that does not carry the same weight as research for promotions (SFNRI Group 2017, p. 236).

Understanding my work based on the expectations of others

Academic visual artist and curator Brenton Maart (2022, p. 11) writes within the exhibition catalogue that my work presents a complex amalgamation of positionalities from which I interrogate the "personal" and the "professional". He refers to the split in my roles and demands on me as an academic, mother, teacher, and invisible service worker as near-schizophrenic and a false dichotomy.

During discussions on the piece's development, my female and male colleagues with children proved very supportive and open to discussion. After the exhibition opened, only other academic mothers responded to my installation and came to discuss the piece with me. The response from other academic mothers proved positive and uplifting. One colleague approached me after the opening to tell me how touched she was by my work's effort to expose the extreme limits academic mothers were pushed to during the recent pandemic to try and nurture our families and students.

Opgedoek

I planned for this piece to record my experience, but the installation became a feminist statement. For this reason, I chose the title, *Voorskoot*, and the other headings within this paper to link to the idea of the Afrikaans homemaker and mother. However, in doing my invisible work of caring, mothering, creating with my daughter, mentoring students and finding opportunities, I protest the expectation of work/life balance. Based on the reams of academic papers on this subject, this only confirms the need for change. One is not born an academic, and one is not born a mother. Both roles are learned and

grown into. I find it easy to care for my child, my students, my department, and my institution, as I believe in the validity of each. However, this ease of caring can cost me my identity, especially when the boundaries between my roles are torn as they have been during the pandemic.

As Bradley and Oldham (2020, p. 92) conclude, I must continue facing my many roles with "the knowledge that work-life balance is a myth, gender inequities exist, and that the world of academia can change and needs to change".

Creating the overall work proved cathartic and has guided me to say 'no' more. However, students and faculty still attempt to intrude on my boundaries physically, emotionally and after hours. There is still an expectation after the COVID-19 pandemic that I must be available 24 hours a day. This pastoral work will form the basis of my next creative output, based on 'invisible work'. This output will add another cycle to my aesthetico-action research methodology.

As I migrate between my roles, I constantly remind myself of my boundaries, a fine, invisible line now permanently drawn in my consciousness. As academic mothers, do we make peace with our lot, or is the engaged discussion a way to create greater awareness?

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