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# Building a Village of Hope: Collaboratively Navigating M(o)therhood, Scholarship, and Identity

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Abstract: This paper investigates the ways in which bilingual and bicultural mothers experience motherhood and formal schooling of their children while also navigating doctoral programs. Mothering is both heavy work and a potential place of power (Lockman, 2019). Leveraging the lived experiences and aspirations of (other)mothers for their children has a strong, lasting impact on how children see their potential futures (Matos, 2019). Understanding and emphasizing epistemologies of the home (Garcia & Delgado Bernal, 2021) is, therefore, a meaningful place to begin discussion about goals and trajectories for mothers and their children. This paper reports findings from the first four plática sessions, each emphasizing aspects of Cultural Capital (Yosso, 2005) with mothers currently enrolled in doctoral programs with school-age children. Mothers and Othermothers (Collins, 2000) came together over Zoom from two universities to discuss their aspirations, successes, and challenges in navigating doctoral programs while supporting their children. Through the use of pláticas and collective biography methods, this study amplifies the voices of women caregivers and their experiences, asking the following questions to understand individual experiences and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse m(o)thers also navigating higher education.

Keywords: Mothering; Cultural Capital; Student Parent; Bilingual, Participatory Methods

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## Introduction

> ***"****I want my daughter to be fierce, strong-willed, independent, intelligent, and unrelenting when it comes to her life and her decisions. I want her to be confident in herself…to know that… good enough is damn well good enough."*

This manuscript grew out of a desire to build community. A group of m(o)ther scholars who were navigating similar waters with similar (lack of) resources, all seeking the same proverbial village it takes to raise a child–one that seemed to be missing for us as m(o)thers. We met tired, greeted each other's children over Zoom, and rescheduled due to the needs of our families. We wrote late into the evenings or in the early morning hours while our families slept, because that's what m(o)thers do: We make a way when there seems to be none.

While biological m(o)thers are regularly recognized in their roles, non-traditional m(o)thers and other individuals who identify as women and do caregiving work are not always welcomed into the folds of m(o)therhood, although they are doing m(o)therwork (Calarco, 2024; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Rodriguez, 2024). Within our research team, we have both biological and non-biological m(o)thers. We intentionally use the term and spelling of "m(o)thers" to acknowledge the work of women caregivers, regardless of their biological status as m(o)thers (Calarco, 2024; O'Rilley & Green, 2024).

We value the work of Othermothers (Collins & Bilge, 2020) and the Tias, Primas, and other women who make up the m(o)ther figures in our lives (Rodriguez, 2024). We strive to answer the call of Matricentric Feminism to open spaces to women beyond traditional biological m(o)therhood (O'Rilley & Green, 2024). The need for (re)designing academic spaces for us as m(o)thers is overdue. These spaces, we agreed, were not designed with us as women, as m(o)thers, in mind. We wanted to ensure we were committed to the inclusive redesign we were proposing.

This work became a pause. We honor our lived experiences as valid truths and have blended our discussions and collective memories into meaningful, legitimate examples of why and how (re)designing scholarship and academic spaces is necessary. Through our collective experiences, we hold space for ourselves and other m(o)ther scholars who may experience similar barriers to their success. We also challenge those who are outside of m(o)thering to consider the value that m(o)ther scholars bring to academic, social, professional, and personal spaces.

This work used a blending of *pláticas* (Delgado Bernal et al., 2023; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) and collective biography (Crawford et al., 1992; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Haug et

al., 1987; Onix & Small, 2001). The flexible and participant-driven nature of *pláticas* allowed us to move beyond the questions we had prepared around aspects of our children's schooling and instead turn inward–to trace how these experiences lived within us. This turning inward created space for collective reflection: sharing our narratives and co-constructing a collective representation of what emerged from our experiences and conversations. In our discussions, reflections, and recommendations, we continually revisited the following questions:

1. Can a village exist within academia – or must we build our own?
2. What kinds of mentorship help us survive as m(o)thers in academia – and what kinds of absence harm us?
3. What does it mean to m(o)ther within academic spaces?
4. How do our experiences of m(o)therhood intersect with race, citizenship, class, and other aspects of our identities?

This work was iterative and collective, vulnerable and brave. It is the effort of the small village we have created. Through the lenses of critical scholarship, including Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005) and Matricentric Feminism (O'Rilley & Green, 2024), we question the expectations for m(o)ther scholars and the systems that ask so much yet do so little to ensure our inclusion and well-being. While we recognize we were not considered in the conception of these academic spaces, we believe in the immeasurable strength and power of m(o)thers to create, birth, and breathe life into redesigning these spaces.

## Positionality Statement: A Note on Who We Are

The authors write from diverse yet intersecting positions as m(o)thers navigating academic institutions. **Adriana** is a first-generation Latina mother, wife, daughter, and future *doctora* and defines this work as an epitome of who she is as a person because it represents her lived experience. Having two children while in her doctoral program has tested Adriana's capabilities and her capacity. **Victoria**, a Latin American scholar from Argentina, who critically acknowledges the privilege afforded by her settler-colonial heritage, is the mother of two and has been in graduate school since her first child was born. Her perspective is shaped by years of balancing caregiving and intellectual work while continuously navigating questions of identity, belonging, and language after leaving her country nine years ago and pursuing a PhD in her second language. **Tadria** is a first-generation undocumented scholar who became a step-mother of her 6-year-old son while in her Ph.D. program. She understands motherhood as an active choice of love rather than a given title since her connection with her son is not biological. **Ashley** is a doctoral candidate who has been in m(o)thering and caregiving roles for both older and younger generations in her family before having her first daughter during her Ph.D. program. She acknowledges her privileges in coming from a White, English-dominant background, while also recognizing the importance of honoring her daughter's reality coming into a bilingual, bicultural family.

## Theoretical Framework

Our work is shaped by two frameworks: Matricentric Feminism (O'Rielly & Green, 2024) and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). We recognize the intersectionality in our own identities and in our work as well as the ways in which we leverage our own capital to navigate institutions that were not designed to accommodate or welcome m(o)thers into

academic spaces. The combination of these frameworks provides a unique and blended perspective that informs our asset-based and solution-centered analysis.

### Matricentric Feminism

Matricentric Feminism is a strand of feminism that centers and empowers mothers and other women who do the work of mothering (m(o)others) (O'Reilly & Green, 2024). As Garner (2024) explains, "Matricentric feminism centres on mothers, women, and carework while it advocates for the disruption of systems that prevent liberation" (p. 214). This approach not only validates the labor of mothering but also challenges the structural barriers that shape and constrain it. We use this framework while honoring our own and others' intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), acknowledging the many identities we hold within and beyond m(o)thering.

Feminists who highlight m(o)thering work done by othermothers (Collins, 2016), regardless of their biological status as biological mothers, build a strong foundation for this perspective. Matricentric feminism defines m(o)thers as those who identify as mothers, rather than by biological, imposed, or gendered assumptions of what womanhood and mothering should be (O'Reilly & Green, 2024, p. 16). We use the term m(o)therwork in an effort to emphasize how m(o)thers and their labor are valuable, while simultaneously undervalued and often made invisible by society at large. Matricentric feminism also recognizes that m(o)thers are not somehow predisposed to being all-knowing or great at m(o)therwork. M(o)thering is a learned practice with a steep learning curve. Matricentric feminism challenges the idea that women are inherently better caregivers or better m(o)thers (O'Reilly & Green, 2024). This misconception has traditionally been used to take advantage of the work m(o)thers and women do and further exploit their labor for the benefit of patriarchal systems (Calarco, 2024).

### Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso (2005) identifies six types of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW): familial, social, navigational, linguistic, aspirational, and resistance capitals. Familial capital relates to how family relationships help to strengthen and inform the passing of cultural knowledge. Social capital is the network of community resources and connections. Navigational capital is the knowledge and resources used to find ways through broader institutions, such as the workforce and education. Linguistic capital refers to how one uses various languages and linguistic skills across styles and situations. Aspirational capital is the goals and hopes one has for their future and the futures of those around them. Resistance capital is how individuals and communities work to challenge inequity through oppositional behavior. These aspects of cultural capital often intersect and are not easy to divide into individual components. Together, the forms of CCW create a set of opportunities, networks, and skills that challenge systemic barriers to success and provide support for individuals and communities to find strength and success.

In centering m(o)ther's unique perspectives, while also honoring that in many instances forms of CCW were central to our narratives and plática discussions, our team felt strongly that both frameworks served as theoretical frameworks for our analysis. Our intersectional identities and critical scholarship are components of both of these frameworks and help to shape our understanding of the barriers we face as m(o)ther-scholars and the solutions we propose to address and correct the inequities we identify in our analysis.

## Methodology: *Pláticas* and Collective Biography

Our methodological approach combines *pláticas* and collective biography, two practices grounded in relational, feminist, and decolonial traditions. We began by coming together to explore the possibility of collaborating and holding shared sessions where we could talk through elements of m(o)therhood and uncover both intersections and differences in our experiences. From those initial conversations, we decided that *pláticas* would be an appropriate and meaningful way to hold space together. The participants in these pláticas, and in the subsequent collective biography, were the four authors of this manuscript. Because the project was grounded in our own lived experiences as m(o)ther-scholars, no external recruitment efforts took place.

*Pláticas*, which translate as *conversación* or *charla* in Spanish, are more than simply talking. Rooted in everyday storytelling, they are a form of collective sense-making through which wisdom, memories, and counsel circulate among families and close friends. As a research methodology, *pláticas* emphasize reciprocal, informal dialogue as a means of co-creating knowledge and centering participants' lived experiences (Mejía & Canas, 2024). The choice of pláticas also felt appropriate because of our personal and familial connections to Latiné traditions. These traditions include larger events, like celebrations and holidays, but also everyday ways of being and interacting with family, the community, and the larger world around us. *Pláticas*, as a feminist methodology rooted in Latiné, Hispanic, and Chicana communities, offered a culturally resonant way for us to gather and reflect.

The *plática* framework (Delgado Bernal et al., 2023; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) allowed us to enter each session as equals, engaging in shared conversation rather than hierarchical dialogue. While we brought guiding questions into each meeting, we allowed the conversations to flow naturally, led by what felt most present, emotional, or pressing. This openness and flexibility reflect the ethos of *pláticas*: a decolonial, feminist approach that values and centers knowledge born from lived experience, affect, memory, and relationships (Delgado Bernal et al., 2023). In alignment with this ethos, we participated as both researchers and participants, engaging reflexively in the same processes of dialogue and witnessing that we study. This active, situated participation is a defining feature of pláticas.

The first three *pláticas* centered around our experiences with formal schooling in the U.S.: both our own journeys as students and our hopes and worries for our children's educational futures. After the third session, the first author reviewed transcripts and notes and identified recurring threads. We then held a working session where we discussed together those emerging threads – adding comments, raising questions, and noting any disagreements or missing pieces. This collaborative process helped us arrive at five central themes, which became the foundation for our next phase.

Rather than moving into coding or analysis, we shifted toward collective biography as a way to deepen and extend the conversation. Collective biography is a method grounded in the memory work developed by Frigga Haug and other feminist sociologists (Haug et al., 1987). The goal is for the participating individuals to use memory and self-reflection to examine how they have been shaped by society and how they have come to see themselves (processes of socialization and subjectification) (Gannon, 2015). Emerging from the tradition of memory work, collective memory work (or collective biography) extends the practice from the personal to the relational. It begins with the understanding that "significant memories are critical in the constitution of the subject" (Hawkins et al., 2016, p. 166), yet pushes this insight further by situating remembering within the social. Through the act of recalling and interpreting reflections or memories together, participants come to recognize how personal experiences are shaped

within broader cultural, historical, and material conditions. In this way, collective memory work shifts the focus from the individual self to the relational processes through which subjectivities take form – the process of becoming-*with* others, histories, and power (Davies & Gannon, 2006).

In academic settings, collective biography functions as a methodology that values collaboration and connection within a context that is particularly shaped by competition and individualism – existing, therefore, in a space of tension and contradiction (Gonick & Gannon, 2013). In this sense, the methodology dismantles the hierarchical structures that privilege the isolated and autonomous researcher and the notion of detached expertise, offering instead a practice of co-authorship, mutual vulnerability, and shared meaning-making.

With the themes that emerged from the *pláticas* in hand, each of us took time to reflect individually – responding with memories and personal stories that connected to the shared topics. These were not written as data points, but as situated, embodied reflections on what it means to live as a m(o)ther-scholar. After writing, we shared our reflections, taking time to read and respond – offering comments, connections to literature, and moments of resonance. Some comments were analytical, others were affective. Some just expressed gratitude for the shared vulnerability, stating simply "thank you for sharing this."

We then gathered again to discuss our reflections as a group. As outlined in collective biography methodology, we did not analyze or interpret each other's writing (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gannon & Gonick, 2014). Instead, we witnessed. We listened. The goal was not to conclude, but to be in relation with each other and with our own stories. This methodology allowed us to name shared threads while holding space for complexity, contradiction, and difference. In a context where knowledge is often only considered valid when backed by external "experts," we affirm our lived experiences, reflections, and shared narratives as legitimate forms of knowledge. As m(o)thers, we are the experts of our own lives, and we have chosen to co-create meaning through collective witnessing. Our findings emerge from this grounded process, and while we engage more deeply with existing literature in the discussion, it is not to validate our truths – but to situate them within a broader conversation. While our work centers on our shared experiences as scholar-m(o)thers, both *pláticas* and collective biography are adaptable methodologies that can be applied across different contexts, participant groups, and research questions. Their utility lies in creating dialogic, relational spaces for collective reflection and meaning-making, regardless of discipline or setting.

Because we are based at two different institutions, all our meetings took place over Zoom. Our *pláticas* and collective memory sessions unfolded in the in-between spaces of our everyday lives. Sometimes with cameras on, sometimes off, depending on where we were and what was happening around us. Conversations from the car, during school drop-offs and pick-ups. Meetings during nap time, or interrupted by unsuccessful nap times. One of us would join while walking, on those days when the body could not bear another hour in the chair. The texture of our meetings mirrored the texture of our lives as m(o)thers: fluid, interrupted, entangled. Though distanced by kilometers, we were united in the shared effort of holding it all together, of making space for reflection amid the overflow. In these fragments of time and care, we carved out space to think, to write, to listen, and to remember together.

## Academic Context and Contribution

Several authors touch on the complexities and demands of m(o)therhood from which we draw in this article (Calarco, 2024; O'Rilley & Green, 2024; Rodriguez, 2024). While these and other scholars discuss the inequities of the patriarchal system in which we live and the strains of m(o)therhood, we chose to focus on the intersections of these realities within our scholarship. We were inspired by sessions and informal conversations at a professional conference (Chaney Fotenot, 2025). This session highlighted how women and m(o)thers work to leverage relationships and community while contributing to the academic community. This work is not necessarily new; it is still emergent and growing, particularly at the intersections we explore in this article.

### Limitations

Some of the limitations of this work are the same accommodations that allow for the intricacies of our lives to coincide with this work. Due to this work having to take place online via Zoom, as we were located in two different states, there were limitations with our work, which further showcases the complexities of our lives as m(o)thers and doctoral students. There were also limitations due to our small sample size, creating homogeneity among the participants. The findings only speak to our experiences and therefore cannot be broadly generalized.

## Findings

Throughout our discussions, in the form of *pláticas* and collective biography, we followed the tides of iterative practice. We grappled with the concept of a village in academia and if it were even possible to create. We shared stories of mentorship: what we have, what we lack, and what we long for. We explored what it means to m(o)ther *in, out of,* and *through* academic spaces. Interplaying through all this are our various and intersecting identities and how they shape the ways we interact with the people and systems around us. The themes that follow reflect these layered conversations, offering insights into the complexities and possibilities of m(o)thering within academia.

### Community and Mentorship: Building the Village We Weren't Given

> *"My comunidad uplifts me every day not only as a scholar and a woman, but specifically as a mother."*

It takes a village to raise a child, and it also takes one to raise a m(o)ther. We aren't, despite what some societal narratives tell us, born knowing how to m(o)ther. We have built community through intentional effort, pushing through discomfort in being vulnerable with others about m(o)therhood and m(o)thering. We have had to carve out new relationships, as the transition into motherhood often reshapes – or even strains – our existing connections. As one of us reflected, "I thought that motherhood would bring my friend(s) and me closer together, it actually drew us farther apart…" So, the village that may have existed before no longer looked the same after m(o)therhood. We have each worked to rebuild community around ourselves, through family, colleagues, mentors, and our regular meetings with each other. We strive to build practices and networks that help us find ways to create resilience in ourselves and in our children.

We heard the term "harmonizing" used in place of balance (Morgan, Wright, Ninson, & Abdallah, 2025). This resonated with each of us. The concept of harmonizing acknowledges the many tones and responsibilities present for us at once and how they all shift and change at

different times depending on our current priorities. The tensions between m(o)thering being seen as less valuable or less serious than academic work, alongside the pressure to perform m(o)therwork and scholarship flawlessly without compromise, make a balance hard to find. This concept of harmonizing cuts through the good mom/bad mom dichotomy and allows us to be whole (Palko, 2024). The idea of blending our many identities instead of compartmentalizing and turning them on and off felt authentic. This can only be accomplished with the support of a community. Emotional support, cultural continuity, and relationships with like-minded peers help us find spaces where m(o)thering and scholarship don't have to exist in separate spheres.

A few faculty have been among "the greatest advocates for continuing (our) scholarship at full speed while still appreciating the finer moments and details of motherhood." One m(o)ther scholar shared about a professor in her program, who ensures that she's able to attend and travel to conferences and meetings with her daughter and helps her get equitable funding to do so. She reflected, "This isn't just me, either; other parents…have the same benefit. I had already chosen to have a fully woman-led committee, but this transition in my life solidified that this is not only what I wanted, but what I needed." While not all of us are fortunate enough to have had strong ties to peer and faculty mentors, we all recognize the value of the navigational capital we have through those relationships and the desire to have those connections on a personal level.

Some of us were fortunate to have advisors and peers who guided and supported us by providing funding avenues, helping us to navigate maternity leave and legal obstacles, and facilitating connections with people who furthered our professional and personal experiences. As a result, we have acquired invaluable skillsets that we didn't know we would need, but that have served us well.

## (Dis)Embodied Spaces: Where Are We Supposed to Belong?

> *"We're expected to compartmentalize. To 'perform' academia in one space, and motherhood in another. But in reality, these parts of our lives are entangled."*

Despite claims of embracing diverse, whole selves, academic institutions are not designed for those pushing strollers or holding children on their laps during class. There is an implicit architecture of exclusion that insists success requires setting aside other parts of life. Especially those parts related to caring, tending, and nurturing, given their sharp contrast with the competition and individualism that academic life models and rewards.

Across campuses, there are barely any signs that m(o)thers are welcome. The absence is visible and loud: no changing tables, no childcare at conferences, no extra funding so m(o)thers can attend conferences with their children, no spaces where children are simply expected, not even a playground on campus! We are made aware that caregiving belongs elsewhere – or that *we* belong elsewhere.

A m(o)ther's need for a lactation room or a quiet place to be with a child becomes a disruption to the institutional norms. Some of us have had to pump in bathrooms or give up breastfeeding earlier than we wanted – not because we chose to, but because the institution made it nearly impossible. "(Ending breastfeeding) was the result of trying to make motherhood and academia fit together in a space not designed to hold both," one of us reflected. There are no places where we can exist fully with our children. "I make it work – but it's exhausting." The work of creating space – finding a corner to pump, improvising a diaper change, keeping a child

entertained – always falls on us. It does not take much to design for inclusion, yet even the bare minimum seems out of reach.

Even when we are told we are "welcome," it often feels like we are bending the rules. "I can't believe you brought your kid," someone said to one of us on campus. As if being a scholar and a m(o)ther in the same room was a contradiction. The pressure to be only one thing at a time – student, researcher, m(o)ther – is constant. But in practice, those roles are never separate.

This split is not only physical or logistical – it is also cultural. We are often perceived as less serious, less committed, and less productive. One m(o)ther recalled a professor saying, "Well, it was a good run," after she announced her pregnancy. Others described professors who made it clear that their sole identity should be that of the scholar – anything else would slow them down. We are expected to 'do' academia in one space, and m(o)therhood in another. But these borders are porous. "These parts of our lives are entangled," one m(o)ther scholar wrote. "The challenge isn't just logistical – it's existential." M(o)thering and scholarship are not separate hats we wear – they are woven together. The problem, then, is not the entanglement, but the institution's refusal to recognize it.

And yet, in small moments, we feel possibility. A professor says, "mothers and children belong in all spaces." A child is affectionately nicknamed "Professor June" (pseudonym) because she hangs around in conferences and lab meetings. These moments remind us that our children are not just tagging along – they are part of the academic experience. They are growing up hearing many voices, languages, and ways of being. It matters. Not just for them, but for what these spaces could become – for universities and for a society that has long treated care as private, hidden, and individual.

These spaces do not exist yet. We are still asking: where do we belong? If we all have to hide or fragment ourselves to fit in, then maybe it isn't us, but the space that needs to change. We are not asking for special treatment – we are asking to be seen as a whole. We do not want to choose between being m(o)thers and being scholars. We want spaces that allow us, and support us, to be both.

## Intersections and Inequities: Not All M(o)ther-Scholars Are the Same

> *"...school drop-offs and pick-ups, laundry, lunchboxes, housework, and making time for a relationship – has to happen in the margins. It's exhausting... The toll shows up in my body, in my mental health, in the tension with my partner."*

We are waves in the same sea – sometimes swelling together, sometimes breaking apart – each shaped by distinct winds, yet pulled by a common tide. The need for a range of resources, the fluctuating needs of our growing children, and our own realities at different stages in both the academic process and m(o)therhood journey create an ever-shifting landscape. "No two parent-scholars I know are navigating the same terrain. And yet, we're all held to the same institutional expectations." This evolving, dynamic landscape shows that there's no single way of being a m(o)ther-scholar and, therefore, no one-size-fits-all approach to support.

Our ability and capacity to navigate new and complex situations came up regularly in our pláticas and written reflections. We repeatedly emphasized feeling pressure to compartmentalize and exist in the margins, and how that manifested for each of us in different ways. "This is what intersectionality looks like in practice – it's about how access, resources, family configurations,

and immigration status shape the day-to-day capacity to show up as a parent, a student, and a researcher."

We each have different experiences related to our legal status within the US, where we live, work, and study. For some, the reality of living without documentation creates a state of high-alert stress. More than one m(o)ther noted "that anxiety and fear have been amplified with the current political climate." This means vastly different experiences of politics, school policy, and community policing. Even traveling to conferences and accessing scholarships is different based on citizenship status, regardless of the contributions each of us is making to better our community. This status changes how we are able to advocate for our children and ourselves. "The weight of the world feels heavy on me, especially during these times." Even with time and documented status, the sense of belonging is not guaranteed. One M(o)ther expressed that after almost a decade working and studying in the US, they "carry the sense of being a guest. A long-term visitor without a real place." Once again, relegated to the margins.

This sense of difference applies to our languages as well. For example, one author has English as a first language, and bilingualism has always been seen as a valuable and marketable asset. However, for others in the group, the experience of bilingualism has not always felt encouraged or supported by educational institutions. All of us are striving to raise bilingual and bicultural children, which presents challenges when considering school options, how we move through the communities in which we live and work, and the aspirations we have for our children. Each of us has elements of our m(o)therhood shaped by women who m(o)thered us–for better and worse. We are learning to navigate academia, community, and all aspects of life, not just for ourselves, but to ease the process for our children in the future. We also want to have networks of community for our children to lean on, which means creating those networks and modeling the ability to find strength and connection in these places.

### Systemic Racism and the Fear of Raising Racialized Children

> *"All of these complex layers add to my experience as a mother because I don't want to have my children struggle like I did, and I want them to enjoy their lives and be as present as possible."*

The *pláticas* and collective memory work reveal how institutional oppression is intensified for m(o)ther-scholars with multiple marginalized identities. Immigration status emerged as a key factor contributing to instability and marginalization. One m(o)other-scholar stated, "I walk with my undocumentedness every day of my life… even though I am not afraid to say it, I am absolutely petrified because now I have children." This quote articulates the present tension between political resistance and existential fear. Systemic racism intersects with legal status, making basic acts of survival – employment, housing, parenting – contingent and vulnerable.

Immigration status proved to be a significant source of insecurity, shaping m(o)ther-scholars' daily lives and long-term planning. This insecurity was intensified by financial hardship, making it even more difficult for m(o)ther-scholars to navigate the dual demands of academia and caregiving. One of us described living in "a constant state of anxiety and fear," a reality heightened by the pressures of finishing a PhD and planning for the future in an uncertain political climate. The intersection of undocumented status and limited economic resources

constrains access to childcare, housing, healthcare, and professional opportunities, highlighting how structural inequities compound in the lives of undocumented student-parents.

Academic institutions are consistently described as sites of normative whiteness, structured around productivity metrics that disembody and erase m(o)therhood. The expectation to perform as if one were not a caregiver was pervasive. "It was almost a given that if you had children, you were going to fall behind," one speaker noted, "The white professors made it very clear that your sole identity within the program was to be a scholar." This normativity penalizes those who cannot – or choose not to – disentangle their caregiving identities from their scholarly lives. Another participant reflected, "It is like when you are a PhD student and a m(o)ther, you need to become superhuman… while having to divide your time in half." Institutional structures assume a neutral, disembodied academic subject; m(o)thers of color are constructed as deviant, less committed, and less competent by default.

The *pláticas* and collective memory work also revealed how colorism and phenotype influence the way m(o)thering is surveilled and interpreted. One m(o)other shared, "People often think I am [my daughter's] babysitter… because of her hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair." Racial logics of belonging and legitimacy don't just mark our presence and experience in academia – they extend to our children too. Phenotypic mismatch becomes a site of suspicion – a reason to question whether we really belong, whether we are "real" m(o)thers at all. What does it feel like not only to be doubted in your place within academia, but also in your very legitimacy as a m(o)ther?

Additionally, some of us expressed concern over how our sons – particularly those with darker complexions – would be racialized. One m(o)ther stated: "I fear for my son as he grows to be a Black boy in this country full of hatred and racism." The same m(o)ther reflected on her son's adultification: "The principal suspended him and tried to label the incident as 'sexual assault'… even though he was just a seven-year-old child." Furthermore, the same m(o)ther explains that her son's school called Child Protective Services (CPS) after they pushed back against the principal for suspending their son and labeling the incident as sexual assault. As a result, the whole family had to be interviewed, and CPS had to "see" their home. Although this m(o)ther was able to advocate for their son in ways that they might not have been able to if they were not a graduate student, it still took emotional labor and time to deal with the situation. Nonetheless, this m(o)ther was expected to continue to meet deadlines, attend lectures and otherwise perform the duties of a m(o)ther and scholar without pause. Academia does not account for the added labor m(o)thers, and particularly m(o)thers of color, do in advocating and protecting their children from racism in our society. These examples underscore the intergenerational transmission of systemic racism and its amplification through gendered and racialized surveillance.

### Mom Guilt and the Myth of Balance

> *"I always come last because if I do anything for myself, I feel guilty that I am taking time away from my children to spend time with me."*

Being women, and especially women of color, adds yet another layer to m(o)therhood – bringing complexities and responsibilities to our lives that many others do not have to navigate. With those added layers also comes mom guilt, which casts a shadow over how we navigate our lives. We are constantly figuring out how to manage everything on our own, because if we ask

for help, people assume we are incapable, which quickly translates into being judged as bad m(o)thers. As one m(o)ther scholar shared, “I’m trying to learn that rest can be resistance, but it’s tough not to feel and give into the pressure to always be doing something; the house is never clean enough, that draft is never done enough.” We as m(o)thers feel like we can never be enough, never do enough. We always have to add one more thing to our plate because, unfortunately, we are often judged for our downfalls, rather than for all that we have accomplished as m(o)thers.

When we become m(o)thers, it is often seen as a disability by our peers and faculty. As if being a m(o)ther will hinder our academic performance and outcomes. The strength we must embody is incredible. People generally fail to recognize becoming a m(o)ther requires true strength. Outside of the mental and emotional strength, how our bodies and brains physically change during and after pregnancy to adjust to m(o)therhood is amazing. As one of us stated, “The emotional weight of mothering and working and caregiving isn’t always visible, and when it goes unacknowledged, it can start to feel like resentment or isolation.” Our battles are often internal, and we as women do not seek help because of how we will be viewed as weak if we do. It is in our upbringing, especially when older daughters are parentified to become second m(o)thers to their siblings and not given the same grace as sons in a family. One m(o)ther mentioned, “Sometimes I feel guilty in relying on my village because there is this pressure of having to do everything on your own and be able to balance everything else.” Living up to the expectations of others and our expectations of trying to do everything ourselves can lead to guilt.

All of us in this group have spent years navigating graduate school as m(o)thers – juggling not only the demand to keep up with all our responsibilities, but also the expectation to perform at 110% as both scholars and m(o)thers. In stark contrast, our male counterparts are given grace, and deadlines are extended for them, or they are provided with opportunities that pass us by because we cannot “perform” at the level they can, even when they also have children at home. However, because they are not always the primary caregiver – or aren’t perceived as such – they are often praised for minimal effort, while our commitments and work are taken for granted.

Not only are we students, but we are m(o)thers, partners, siblings, and children; all of these identities carry various responsibilities even if we have our own families and are grown adults. This feeds into the narrative of the 'bad mom '/'good mom' dichotomy. If we prioritize our children over our work and studies, we risk not producing or doing enough for our programs, which can lead to falling behind. If we put our schoolwork before our children, then we are bad m(o)thers because how dare we choose ourselves before our children? For example, as women in graduate school programs, specifically those pursuing doctorate degrees, an expectation is placed on us to attend academic conferences, regardless of whether we present or not. As m(o)thers, we have to think about childcare, do we bring our children or not? Part of this challenge involves organizing childcare at these conferences. One of us shared that because she didn’t know childcare was available, she made the hard decision to leave her children behind, only giving her the opportunity to attend one day of a three-day conference, shortening her time for networking. This is a clear example of how academic spaces continue to be built for those without caregiving responsibilities – spaces where m(o)thers must constantly navigate invisible barriers just to be included.

## Discussion: Re-designing Academic M(o)therhood

As we sat with the five themes that emerged from our *pláticas* and collective memory work, we noticed a thread running through all of them: the urgent need to re-design academic spaces – not just physically, but also culturally and even ontologically – because they were never built with m(o)thers in mind. This is not a new realization. We are entering a long-standing conversation about how higher education has historically centered certain bodies, ways of being, and priorities, while marginalizing others. The modern university, shaped by colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal logics, continues to perpetuate a narrow image of the human as *homo economicus*: completely self-centered and driven by productivity and accumulation (Escobar et al., 2024). Layered onto that is the neoliberal ideal of the "perfect worker": always available, unburdened by caregiving, and wholly devoted to the institution (Davies & Frink, 2014; Minnotte & Minnotte, 2021). M(o)therhood stands in direct contrast to these models, as it is embodied and constantly pulled toward the needs of others. Scholars like Ahmed (2012) remind us that even the so-called diversity work in universities often ends up protecting whiteness and avoiding real institutional change.

Higher education in the U.S. began with colonial colleges established and designed for the sons of white, elite settlers (Geiger, 2016), and although much has changed since then, that foundation remains evident. Today, universities enroll more racially and economically diverse students – including Black, Latiné, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American, immigrant, and first-generation students – but the core of the institution still reflects and reinforces white, middle-class culture and norms (Hurtado et al., 1998; Worthington et al., 2008). For many students of color, that means navigating campus climates that might feel anything but welcoming. These are not just surface-level issues. They are shaped by a long history of exclusion, and reinforced through everyday structures, attitudes, and interactions (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Hurtado, 1994; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Representation alone is not enough when students are made to feel like they do not belong. The psychological and behavioral dimensions of campus climate – how people perceive and interact with one another – have significant impacts on students' sense of worth, confidence, and ability to thrive (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Cabrera et al., 1999).

Higher education, as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue, continues to perpetuate the colonial hierarchies it was founded on. Currently, President Trump's office and initiatives have been openly targeting DEI efforts, affirmative action, and any attempt at racial or gender justice and inclusion. Since his election, these patterns have only gotten worse (Saul, 2022; Savage et al., 2023). The spaces that were already hard to navigate for many are becoming even more hostile. It is a reminder that these struggles are not just about policy – they are about power, and about whose lives are allowed to fully exist in the university and beyond. So, as we reflect on the themes that emerged through our *pláticas* on m(o)therhood, we are also asking what it would mean to transform academia in general. These themes reveal that re-designing academic m(o)therhood is not about "fixing" individuals to fit the institution, but about radically rethinking the institution itself – centering care, pluriversality, and collective life.

The change and redesign we envision unfold in three waves. These waves are inspired by the tides of our own experiences, the insights of other m(o)ther scholars (e.g., O'Rilley & Green, 2024), and the recognition that just as one wave flows into the other, so do the challenges we face as m(o)thers in academic spaces. Our waves begin with the relational, progress to the institutional, and culminate in the political space.

## *Relational* Waves of Healing

Deep healing, we believe, begins in community, in the village that m(o)thres, and especially m(o)ther-scholars, need but too often do not have. The first necessary step in re-designing academia to truly welcome and support m(o)thers, and others who have been equally excluded, is to prioritize relationality.

From an early age, women are expected to care for their communities rather than rely on them. As Calarco (2024) writes,

> We groom girls to stand in for the social safety net from the time they're old enough to hold a baby doll…We give them toy vacuum cleaners to play with, task them with caring for younger siblings and cousins and neighbors, and keep close tabs on their movements, while boys are allowed to run wild. (p. 21)

This expectation extends beyond childhood and leaves women at all stages doing m(o)therwork: as primas, tias, cousins, and neighbors in various capacities (Rodriguez, 2024). Women are expected to m(o)ther as if they don't work, and work as if they aren't m(o)thers – leaving them unrecognized in both space and community. They are also expected to care without being cared for. The first step in this relational wave, then, is acknowledging that m(o)thers cannot and should not be expected to do everything alone. They cannot care for others and themselves without any support. Not if we want them healthy, successful, and whole.

When thinking how to care for m(o)thers, it is important to recognize that m(o)thers are not a monolith. M(o)ther-scholars come from diverse backgrounds and hold intersecting identities (O'Rielley & Green, 2024). Regardless of citizenship status, marital status, or biological m(o)therhood, women, and specifically m(o)ther-scholars, are expected to perform at the same level as those without the same responsibilities and without having the appropriate resources (Calarco, 2024).

These ever-shifting responsibilities create a moving target for how to best support m(o)thers in their journey. But one powerful antidote to this condition is community. Intentional opportunities to build peer-to-peer and peer-to-faculty mentorships and networks can help m(o)ther-scholars navigate the overlapping demands of parenting and academia within their varied contexts. Moreover, policies on maternity leave, child care, and parent support vary widely, creating uneven terrains for m(o)ther scholars. This makes mentorship with specific institutional knowledge vital for building both social and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005).

Building and providing a hub where m(o)thers can find resources, build relationships, and connect with, would foster more than just social and navigational capital. It would also cultivate aspirational and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) by creating space for hope and harmonizing. Shared resources to navigate academic challenges, identify support systems, and practice mutual care have vast transformational potential. While we are m(o)thers with diverse needs who have to care for others, we are not alone. Together, with peers, community, and network, we can create the safety net we need and still don't have.

## *Institutional* Waves of Reform

Re-designing academic m(o)therhood means facing the hard truth that universities were never built for whole m(o)thers. Re-designing calls for dismantling the cultural expectations that force us to fragment our identities and hide our caregiving selves. The pressure to "perform"

m(o)therhood and academia separately reinforces the harmful idea that caregiving is a distraction from research and intellectual labor. As Barad (2007) reminds us, identities are entangled and inseparable. We are who we are through the intra-action of our multiple identities, roles, and relationships. The university's refusal to recognize this entanglement harms m(o)ther-scholars, as they have to continue to split themselves, split their identities. To reimagine academic m(o)therhood is to challenge these outdated binaries.

Physical and logistical inclusion is also important. These inclusion efforts often stop at superficial accommodations – like a lactation room somewhere on campus or an occasional family-friendly event – but fail to transform the very conditions that make care invisible and inconvenient (Ahmed, 2012; Yosso, 2025). To truly re-design academic m(o)therhood in a way that stops splitting m(o)ther-scholars, institutions must weave care into their structures: flexible deadlines, guaranteed childcare, funding that supports dependents, and spaces where children are expected and welcomed.

Creating equitable funding streams with considerations for m(o)thers who need childcare, lodging, and travel eases a significant burden for m(o)thers who wish to continue to harmonize career, academia, and home life. Universities need to make care a foundational value rather than an afterthought (Goodyear, 2021). This is not a small fix – it requires a fundamental shift away from the neoliberal, patriarchal ideal of the "disembodied" worker toward an embodied, relational, and collective way of being.

As women, and especially as women of color, we have historically not belonged in these spaces as they were not created for us (Hurtado et al., 1998; Worthington et al., 2008). We are accepted into these programs and expected to perform at the same level as our peers and non-m(o)thering counterparts. Still, we remain. Since we are in these spaces – and we aren't going anywhere – it is in the best interest of academic spaces to shift towards a more inclusive and holistic approach to our growth and development as scholars. It should not be left up to our advisors, mentors, or specific faculty/staff to make those accommodations for us; supports should be built into the university structure. Even small changes, such as building a playground on campus or expanding funding opportunities to cover child care costs, can help create inclusive spaces for m(o)thers.

These changes not only provide m(o)thers peace of mind and support in staying on track with our program milestones, but they also benefit academia more broadly by enabling the production of meaningful scholarship that enriches academia. M(o)thers bring embodied knowledge and unique perspectives that inspire more creative, relational, and grounded forms of research – shaped not only by our experiences of caregiving, but also by the presence of our children, whose participation invites new ways of thinking, learning, and being in academic spaces.

Institutional reforms are necessary because relational care alone cannot thrive within systems that are structurally indifferent to m(o)thers. Without policies and practices that reflect care as a core value, rather than a personal responsibility, the village cannot be sustained. Institutional change gives shape and stability to the relational networks we build, while also laying the groundwork for broader political transformation.

### *Political* Wave of Hope and Reimagining

When we look at m(o)thering through the perspective of the Western society, it is a very isolating and almost ostracized experience, especially in the United States. Barlow and Chaplin (2010), argue that m(o)thering has historically been a shared and collaborative experience where other m(o)thers, relatives, and friends step in to share the responsibilities to raise a child. Yet, in Western society, m(o)thering has evolved to fall solely on the birthing parent, becoming an isolating and individualistic experience–so much so that the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" almost takes on a negative connotation.

Sunseri (2008) perfectly depicts how in Western society m(o)therhood is the sole responsibility of the birthing parent. "Good" m(o)thers are those who self-sacrifice and prioritize their family's needs above all else, conforming to a male-defined institution of m(o)therhood that functions as a site of oppression (Sunseri, 2008). This ideology sets m(o)thers up for failure, positioning them as solely responsible and expected to instinctively know how to do it all, without help. There is never a win-win situation for us, only a constant negotiation between guilt, inadequacy, and exhaustion. Academia is no different, as it remains entrenched in patriarchal and colonial logics (Greiger, 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1994).

For student m(o)thers of color, these burdens are compounded by systemic racism and institutional neglect. Research shows that student parents of color face specific institutional and structural barriers and often lack access to the necessary resources (Lobnibe, 2013; Barber et al., 2020). Additionally, attacks on inclusive policies at both institutional and national levels further restrict the participation and full inclusion of m(o)thers from academic spaces (Kizkiwski et al., 2024; Savage et al., 2023; Saul et al., 2022).

Policy makers need to recognize the dual challenges of m(o)therhood and academic responsibilities and the intersection of other identities that can impact the experiences of m(o)thers of color (Hemans et al., 2020). More importantly, there needs to be supportive, non-colorblind policies and resources geared to address the specific challenges that m(o)thers of color face (Hemans et al., 2020), such as the lack of acknowledgement of the emotional and mental labor that comes with navigating and raising children in a racialized society (Turner, 2020; Robinson-Wood, 2011). The scholarship on m(o)thers of color raising children of color emphasizes the unique challenges they face in having to racially socialize and advocate for their children within a society marked by systemic racism and discrimination. As reflected by our own m(o)ther participants, m(o)thers raising children of color experience heightened anxiety and fear for their children's safety, especially for their sons (Turner, 2020; Robinson-Wood, 2011). These m(o)thers need to develop distinct parenting strategies, like racial socialization and navigating respectability politics, to equip their children to confront and endure racial bias (DePouw & Matias, 2016; Turner, 2020).

This final wave calls for a political reimagining of academia – one that acknowledges and actively confronts how policies, cultures, and norms have marginalized m(o)thers, and particularly m(o)thers of color. It builds on the relational and institutional waves, insisting that care must be recognized not just as personal or structural, but as a deeply political act requiring collective responsibility and systemic change.

## Conclusion

The experiences of us as m(o)ther-scholars in doctoral programs only serve to illuminate the profound challenges we face collectively in two distinct programs at two universities located

in two different states. Regardless of distance and location, it is apparent that no matter where we are, m(o)thers still face difficulties in navigating academic spaces as m(o)ther-scholars. Our narratives expose how our institutions and departments have systematically failed us. The rigidity of timelines and expectations we face, along with the insufficient support and understanding, continues to marginalize us and our multifaceted identities.

Yet, our experiences and narratives also point towards what is possible. We offered the visions for a different kind of academic future: one where m(o)ther-scholars are not exceptions or afterthoughts, but vital to how knowledge is produced, shared, and lived. Our identities as students, scholars, and m(o)thers are not siloed from each other; they work in harmony every waking day of our lives, making up who we are. These entangled identities shape how we think, teach, write, and care. And because of the unique perspectives m(o)thers bring, we strongly believe it is necessary and beneficial for academic institutions to be redesigned with *us* in mind.

Historically, higher education institutions were not created for us, but we are here. And that means it must change. Implementing policies that acknowledge and support caregivers, cultivating mentorship models that value work-life integration, and recognizing and creating inclusivity of our multiple identities as m(o)ther-scholars aren't just beneficial for us – they contribute to a more equitable academic culture for all.

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