Duoethnography as Transformative Praxis: Conversations about Nourishment and Coercion in the COVID-Era Academy

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This article introduces the feminist praxis of duoethnography as a way to examine the COVID era. As a group of diverse, junior, midcareer, and senior feminist scholars, we developed a methodology to critically reflect on our positions in our institutions and social worlds. As a method, duoethnography emphasizes the dialogical intimacy that can form through anthropological work. While autoethnography draws on individual daily lives to make sense of sociopolitical dynamics, duoethnography emphasizes the relational character of research across people and practices. Taking the relational aspects of knowledge production seriously, we conceptualized this praxis as a transformative method for facilitating radical empathy, mobilizing our collective voice, and merging together our partial truths. As collective authors, interviewers, and interlocutors of this article, the anonymity of duoethnography allows us to vocalize details of the experience of living through COVID-19 that we could not have safely spoken about publicly or on our own.

Keywords transformation, feminist methods, nourishment, coercive care, the academy, COVID-19

COVID-19 has prompted crises across the social sciences—and especially for those accustomed to doing their research in some distant field site—while also stimulating debates about entrenched racial and gender inequities within academic institutions and in the realm of caregiving (Corbera et al. 2020). As universities closed and teaching moved online, K–12 schools and daycares also closed, leaving those with children in the double bind of having to work full time while caring for children at home (Malisch et al. 2020). Evidence has already shown that these circumstances have led to a decline in women's and caregivers' research productivity (Cardel, Dean, and Montoya-Williams 2020; Flaherty 2020; McNulty and Meyers 2021; Staniscuaski et al. 2020). Meanwhile, increased austerity and layoffs on college campuses due to the pandemic have exacerbated longstanding issues of insecurity in higher education (Nietzel 2020; Whitford 2020; Wright, Haastrup, and Guerrina 2020). These trends have unfolded alongside and intersected with the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, shedding light on the ongoing violence endured by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) faculty (Cox 2020; Pirtle 2020).

The violence and precarity of the pandemic confronted the authors of this article with the imminent need to reimagine the worlds we inhabit and the techniques we use to cultivate these worlds. Most of us were severed from the primary means through which we conduct our research, while also coping with the immense pressures of caregiving. At the same time, the institutions for which we work underwent massive structural (mal)adaptations as COVID-19 strained already austerity-driven environments. All around us, colleges were shutting down, downsizing by cutting entire departments, or reversing tenure protections (see Flaherty 2017). At the precise moment that we needed a radical rethinking of the structure of the university, we found ourselves severed from collegial interaction, physically and socially isolated, and burdened by a crushing workload and the expectation that we would offer our bodies as a "buffer" against the hollowed-out welfare systems and absent public health infrastructures of the neoliberal state (Carney 2021).

This article is a collective effort to develop alternative modes of analysis that could reaffirm the individual and collective identities that seemed to erode more each day. Our collaborative group includes women who are queer and straight, women of color and white, based at different kinds of institutions, and at different stages of our careers. While many of us are employed in the United States, not all of us are, and our research and kin networks extend beyond the US and North American contexts. We are members of the Nutrire CoLab, a collective organized to cotheorize the intersections of chronicity and crisis in global food systems. *Nutrire* is from the Latin, "to feed, to cherish." In Spanish, *nutriré* means "I will nourish." Our work is thus aspirational and grounded in the future tense as we collectively engage in alternative world making. We originally came together to articulate a critique of the framing of metabolic illnesses as "diet-related" and to offer instead an understanding of these as a result of policies that are racist, patriarchal, and rooted in settler colonialism, and we continue to talk and write together (Galvéz et al. 2020). While we have different degrees of privilege, we also share a commitment to leveraging collaboration to find and fight for mutually beneficial and complementary agendas (see the Cite Black Women Collective). The conditions of the COVID-era academy implored us to make what Hi'ilei Hobart and Tamara Kneese have described as radical feminist commitments, which use grounded direct actions to cultivate "space of hope in precarious times" (2020: 1), and to co-labor toward the possibility and promise

of transformation. Our work also resonates with what Miriam Ticktin (2020) calls the "burgeoning feminist commons." Ticktin (2020) elaborates:

> COVID-19 has enhanced experiments in what I will call a burgeoning feminist commons. These not only foreground new, horizontal forms of sociality but insist that these are the only way to survive. That is, they acknowledge our porousness, accepting that we must fight for the well-being of everyone if we are to be healthy ourselves.

We were inspired by the works of anthropologists and feminist scholars who have processed challenging life experiences in very public and visible ways while experimenting with different narrative registers, literary forms, and shape-shifting "trickster"-like positionalities (see for instance, Behar 1996; Cai 2008; Cox 2015; Nye and Hamdy 2017; Rosaldo 2013; Sandoval 2000). The disruption of our taken-for-granted fieldwork practices by COVID-19 offers a chance to reflect on what we want the future of fieldwork to be. How can we move away from the colonial and extractive legacies of our field? How can we move toward new approaches to our work that offer the possibility of healing the violence and fractures of our discipline's past? How can we take this time to envision new methodological approaches that acknowledge the myriad ways of knowing the world and move away from extraction of resources and knowledge as the basis of our scholarship?

In the feminist toolkit emerging from a "methodology of the oppressed" (Sandoval 2000), cultivating a trickster, shape-shifting positionality represents a "technology of social transformation" (Sandoval 2000, 2) by which we subvert structures of domination, oppression, and surveillance that consolidate power through forcing one's legibility. Recognizing the impossible stretch expected of all of us, we drew on the trickster and similar tactics to engage in a process of duoethnography (Sawyer and Norris 2013). This method emphasizes the dialogical intimacy that can form through anthropological work. As with autoethnography, we were using research to make sense of the sociopolitical dynamics that shaped our daily lives, yet *duo* emphasizes the relational character of the research. We hypothesized that such a method could be potentially transformative for our group in facilitating radical empathy, mobilizing our collective voice, and analyzing our partial truths. Duoethnography allows us to cultivate a trickster methodology, and this article aims to explore its transformative potential.

The idea for this particular dialogue and writing project was suggested by Megan Carney, when we met in June 2020. We had planned an in-person meetup of the Nutrire CoLab, to be hosted at The New School, a follow-up to our collaborative meeting and writing workshop at Brown University in April 2019. When we had to pivot, instead, to an online meeting format, our group discussions centered on the difficulties we faced while teaching, writing, researching, and caring for our families, communities, and ourselves during pandemic shutdowns. We discussed the duoethnography format as an option that might allow us to explore the moment we were experiencing, utilizing our ethnographic toolkit, while also protecting the vulnerable among us who feared being penalized for critiquing their institution's pandemic response.

The parameters that we agreed upon for the duoethnography were as follows: 1) Model an ethnographic interview that affords fluidity to those involved (i.e., interviewer and interviewee are not fixed subject positions.) 2) Utilize the interview guide that we develop as a group to give some structural consistency across the conversations. 3) Write up our notes from duo interviews in a way that protects anonymity as much as possible. 4) Collaboratively reflect on and integrate the notes to identify key themes for analysis. 5) Co-write about these themes, at times working with a lead

author and other times writing together on a shared document. 6) Reflect on the writing process to incorporate these reflections into the final publication.

From the outset, we encouraged creativity of form (e.g., poetics, prose, and artwork). We conceptualized anonymity not as a passive subject position but rather as a flexible, trickster-like political disguise that affords new possibilities for relating to others. We used the protection offered by duo-ethnography's anonymity to vocalize details of the experience of living through COVID-19 that we could not have safely spoken about publicly or on our own. As such, in the excerpts that follow the different groups decided to refer to themselves in a variety of ways to protect anonymity and to embrace different writing styles. For example some decided to use "she/her" pronouns to refer to either member of the "duo," and others used pseudonyms and titles like "speaker 1," or "anonymous."

Our theorizing of duoethnography as a site of transformation is inspired by anthropologist Faye Harrison's (2010, 101) reflections on dialogue and solidarity wherein she emphasizes the political potential of the ethnographic interview:

> When a real dialogue occurs, both ethnographer and informant are able to demystify their respective understandings of themselves and the world, and arrive at some common ground. Dialogue involves not only a two-way flow of "raw data," but an exchange of information subjected to analysis and critique. In this manner, the ideological underpinnings of knowledge and belief are exposed and challenged so that a more liberating vision can begin to emerge.

Moreover, in the text *Feminist Ethnography* Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven remind us that "it is the feminist practice of paying attention to power differentials that should guide methodological choice" and that the methods we choose should be "both pragmatic and political" (2016, 84). Our choice to commit to anonymity was one such pragmatic and political choice that differs from how duoethnography is typically practiced, with each participant's contributions clearly delineated in the text (Sawyer and Norris 2013). Anonymizing our contributions allowed us to more honestly assess the unequal power dynamics within the academy that have reshaped the most intimate aspects of our lives as caregivers, researchers, and community members.

Our questions and conversations spanned the themes of life in quarantine, COVID-19's intersections with Black Lives Matter mobilizations, the present and future of higher education, caring obligations and excesses, and possibilities for self-care, nourishment, and transformation. The excerpts that follow represent the creative interpretations of these conversations. For us, sharing and writing about our experiences with and for one another while also weaving them together into a collective narrative was undertaken as an act of transformative praxis.

Our approach is shaped by the need to scrutinize how academic institutions continually produce landscapes of disparity with extreme material consequences, particularly in the neoliberal era (Boggs and Mitchell 2018; Giroux 2014; Hundle et al. 2019; Newfield 2016). This set of conditions, compounded by the lack of social safety nets in the United States and the academy more broadly, isolate and make individuals solely responsible for responding to global/structural crises. Here, we are writing against an individualist interpretation of survival and transformation. Rather, we seek to create mutual support systems where we can collectively thrive and transform. Collective feminist methods of transformation offer a "roadmap for envisioning an otherwise," as Hobart and Kneese describe this orientation to survival (2020: 1). Recognizing that we will not survive, thrive, or transform in isolation, we are working to create connections through research and writing that will strengthen and not deplete us. These connections are, in part, what duoethnography offers. This

collective work is an experiment in how to do research both in and against an academic system that utterly fails to acknowledge or account for the caring labor that women and people of color have been responsible for, even before this crisis.

We include the mostly unedited duoethnographies here as a refusal to bend any further, to make our experiences easily palatable or digestible. As we find ourselves forced to process so much for others, as women and caregivers, performing that work again would seem to register as another form of coercive care.

The Duoethnographic Narrative
Coercive care

She is an early midcareer scholar,

With the university job, the grants, and the book.

She lives with her partner and their 4-year-old son,

And is 7 months pregnant with their second child—their "COVID baby."

She is the primary breadwinner.

He is an artist and an adjunct professor.

Together they negotiate the tensions of contingent and stable academic labor under one roof. Watching COVID evaporate even the most modest opportunities.

Just prior to the pandemic they embarked on a cross-country move.

Establishing new connections, or finding a quarantine pod, has been impossible,

And perhaps most detrimental for their young son, who like most children his age, longs for the company of his peers. They watch his hard-won emotional skills deteriorate by the day.

Her 80-year-old mother was with them during lockdown, but has since returned to live in the city.

Their experience of conviviality was difficult. Sometimes toxic.

They feel displaced and disconnected from community,

left to fend for themselves.

"We don't have anybody here."

But had they not moved, they'd be panicking about the pandemic shutting down her former employer.

Amid BLM mobilizations, they regret not being able to protest because of care responsibilities and pregnancy, reckoning with the privilege to abstain.

This has compounded their feelings of isolation and helplessness.

Yet there are only so many "domains of catastrophic news" that can be consumed at any given moment.

They have found pleasure in the simplicity of daily routines.

"We have breakfast together every day, we have dinner together every day, in a way that is spacious."

"There's a steadiness that is possible" in the quarantine life.

She reconsiders how much work travel disrupted life prior to the pandemic.

Being pregnant during this time has amplified her feelings of risk.

She worries about getting sick,

about possibly having to quarantine away from her baby,

about being isolated from her partner during childbirth,

about "cascading interventions."

The academy can be cruel,

Conspiring against fieldwork, motherhood, and junior faculty.

"We are always bound to set some people up to succeed, other people to just stay afloat, and other people to fail."

The "layered inequities" in our institutional lives never cease to agitate her.

Yet she's trying to "take seriously this idea of doing less as a form of doing more."

Nourishing What?

We end our interview with a poignant phrase, "fuck nourishment." The phrase emerged from the frustration many of us experienced during quarantine shutdowns, with the constant labor of care and feeding of children and others. It marks a refusal of the impossible, binary-gendered injunctions of care work. In the face of institutions and communities expecting us to bend and adapt endlessly to the needs of others, it is an expression of anger that we are typically meant to swallow, not share.

COVID has led us to question privilege accompanied by an enduring sense of guilt and fear. If we cannot do the work we are supposed to do, will someone find out? Will someone call us out? Will we be held accountable? In what ways? All these uncertainties create an enduring sense of vulnerability.

Social distancing has challenged the fundamental possibilities for practicing fieldwork. Historically speaking, anthropology is a discipline that values the Malinowskian, wartime bravado of the fieldworker putting himself in personal, emotional, social, and physical risk; but doing fieldwork in a pandemic places others at risk. The pandemic calls into question the moral foundation of "risky methods." Under COVID conditions, is it clear that this exploratory impulse can obviously cause others harm. The virus forces us to sit with the impossibility of carrying on with the traditions of the past.

She thinks about how she is complicit.

"I teach social justice courses. Yet I own a home. I spend a lot of time wondering how I am furthering the very systems I critique. What if the activist-scholar work that I am involved in is simply a kind of performative scaffolding that upholds corrupt systems?"

She wonders if the university, already on the verge of collapse, should in fact, collapse.

"These institutions have been so intensely racist and exclusionary and little sites of privilege making. Maybe they are doing more harm than good? What form of dangerous optimism would want me to reform this historically violent system? Yet it also takes a certain privilege to dismantle the academy and I don't want to give the political right more power to take away the few infrastructures that we can access."

Of course, this is not an innocent "we" that can access this infrastructure, but it is full of racialized and gendered inequalities. In her own household, the realities of "being shoved into an intensely nuclear family situation, taken from sociality and social supports" means she carries the stories of her children and the pain of watching them struggle and suffer from being removed from their own circles of sociality and social supports. She knows that motherly sentiment is derived from long-standing patriarchal discourses, and yet she cannot just will this away.

She keeps "wanting to scream, 'This is not possible!' I want the university to acknowledge that I can't do my job when daycares and schools are not open."

At each turn, in her scholarly work (in our work), in her teaching (in our teaching), in her caring (in our caring), there are dead ends. These dead ends make nourishment "the site of future obligation," not of generative care. Finding the key through this existential ambiguity in these circumstances seems only to lead to more lingering questions.

"I'm so tired of the responsibility falling on me."

Cannot Speak Openly

Virginia Woolf ([1929] 2016, 61): All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain. But what is the state of mind that is most propitious to the act of creation?

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (2016, 30): I do not study in order to write, nor far less in order to teach (which would be boundless arrogance in me), but simply to see whether by studying I may become less ignorant. This is my answer, and these are my feelings . . .

Anonymous: [During shelter-in-place and when the kids' school was closed] I had an identity crisis. To protect myself and my kids, I just suspended all thoughts of work. . . . Having young children at this time is a disadvantage, professionally. There is this dread of being passed over for opportunities because folks know I have children. I can see how that escalates into a pattern in many people's lives, and for women especially.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (2016, 28): I confess that many times that fear has taken the pen out of my hand . . .

Anonymous: Long ago, I committed to collaborating with other women, looking to other women as mentors, and to mostly mentoring other women. It was always proven to me that working with

anyone who didn't explicitly subscribe to feminist and antiracist epistemologies and pedagogies wasn't going to be productive for me. I've been burned one too many times.

Virginia Woolf ([1929] 2016, 42): How to explain the anger of the professors? Why are they angry? It seemed absurd, I thought . . . that a man with all this power should be angry. Possibly when the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority.

Anonymous: I feel muzzled right now, and it couldn't be at a worse time. I'd like to write about the disastrous decision-making by my university, but the stakes are too high, when they're suspending me, you know, midair with this decision [tenure] that will affect my livelihood, my family's livelihood and access to life-saving healthcare for those closest to me who have chronic illnesses. I cannot speak out openly about what's happening. I keep having to sign these university petitions anonymously.

Channel the Anger into Writing

A newborn baby half-sleeps in my arms, stirring often to gurgle; my preschooler is at the table doing artwork, frequently checking in to show me the progress he is making on his rainbow; the oldest focuses intently on his second-grade Zoom class in the changing room, though he breaks to yell over in my direction, "Mom, the teacher is really nice!" I confirm that he has muted himself, which he has.

I was flying home from giving an academic talk when I noticed how many international travelers were wearing masks. The rest of the world seemed to know we were in a pandemic before we did. It hit me then that we were in for something serious. The flight was delayed, and I ended up spending more than thirty hours in the airport. I fly a lot for work, but this time I was seven months pregnant–growing hair and teeth and bones of another human in my body–so the stakes seemed especially high.

The administrators at my university are saying "return to learn," but the conversations are really about putting students in dorms, cafeterias, and other places where they spend money. As much as the administration might say it's in control, it can't control how students will celebrate being back on campus.

I am on parental leave now, which I'm lucky to have because there is no uniform federally mandated policy in this country. In the before times I was good at maintaining boundaries between work and home. I would work all day from 9 to 5, but after hours and weekends were for myself and my family. Now I find I feel better when I do a little work each day.

There is so much love in my home and between my children. Our family bond has really been strengthened during this time. My older kids have become a support system for one another in a vital way. I'm closer to my middle child than ever before–this is the first time since he was an infant that we've had all-day, every day together.

This love strongly contrasts with the truth exposed through the pandemic–that our government does not care about us. In whatever stage of neoliberal capitalism it is that we're in, we are living in a time when our purpose for the state is to generate money for shareholders, with no regard for our health and lives.

We have university officials whose purpose is profit, not to help people learn. We have governmental officials whose purpose is profit, not to care for their residents. It's not hard to ask the question: what is the purpose at all?

This is part of why I've taken up work. I feel as if I'm supposed to be happy—not sad and angry—around my children. So, I channel the anger into writing. That keeps the anger less visible or audible in my household. I've slowly started to take back the kitchen and to cook, which has made me so happy.

Devolution of Responsibility

She was initially shocked that it seemed like "no one was doing anything" about this virus, which was clear to her to be highly contagious and dangerous. She was in the midst of an already hectic semester, so not able to spend hours poring over the news, but she was paying enough attention that she started getting anxious. She is immunocompromised, which may have led her to take things more seriously. She started telling her students that they had to stop meeting in person, moving things virtual of her own accord before university mandates. To her it seemed like on multiple levels there was a "devolution of responsibility to lower levels; everyone in leadership positions was saying it was fine."

This happened at the same time that her children's middle school closed, and she was supposed to assist them with learning from home. In the midst of these two major shifts, she needed to drive across a few states to assist her mother in caring for her stepdad. She just went into "work really hard mode" that has not let up since.

But things have gotten better where she lives. "Still, everyone is nervous and cautious, but part of why we are in a better place is that everyone takes it very seriously." In her community, people have also come together to organize around lost income and rising rates of hunger. People are starting to see that emergency food distribution, for instance, cannot be a long-term solution, so they are starting to do "more political work, even thinking about moving money from the police budget into meeting people's basic needs."

Sometimes I Think I'm a Goddess

She described herself as the classic story about women and work: a screwed academic woman struggling with everything. She has been with her two teenage girls. They are fun. Having teenagers is something else—it is not the same as having young children—they need a different kind of care.

Everything is beautiful, except her ex, who struggles with mental illness. They had joint custody until a year ago, when her girls decided they wanted to stop living with him and live with her full time. That has been hard. "I have been containing two teenage girls by myself. He is so into his own crisis, not connected with anyone else's needs. I feel sorry for him but I am also very angry. He disappeared for a month. He is also an academic, making more money, better position." He went away during the lockdown to do work. He keeps working while she is busy keeping her daughters supported emotionally. "I have to keep absolutely cool because they have enough on their plates. I'm exhausted." She feels that if she showed the anger, frustration, and exhaustion, her daughters would be shocked and scared.

The divorce agreement doesn't stipulate caring. She has never felt so close to that injustice. "So often women have to pay the price for everyone else's mistakes. Women cannot have a crisis because everyone depends on you."

"Sometimes I think I'm a goddess. I'm doing this on my own. I publish, take care of my girls, cook. Then some days I feel terrible. So many women are killed by partners. Women are not safe at home, and that is clearer to me than ever." More women killed by partners than by COVID, she points out. She is learning a lot from her teenagers about how to respond. They have a name for when they reach a breaking point, calling it a COVID breakdown. "They cry and then they hug."

The Inequity Becomes More Explicit

Speaker 1: Each dean and provost is being asked to bail out their own rowboat, but we're all precarious in the absence of a national, state-level response to the pandemic. Families are supposed to fill in the gaps of collapsing institutions while working and saving the economy. The state has always been unstable as a concept, but we never expected this magnitude of necropolitics.

Speaker 2: We were told, "Wash your hands. Wash your hands. Use sanitizer. Wipe surfaces down because the surfaces may be able to carry something." We now know that's wrong. I can't imagine the risk-taking strategies of people who are forced to choose between going without pay or risking death. People are left without options. The inequity becomes much more explicit. Some people can afford to go without pay and to buy the supplies that would protect them. Thousands upon thousands of people are dying and the state is nowhere; the state is nothing.

People were joking about how hard it was to be locked down in their Malibu mansions. These same people were telling us that "we're all in this together." The illusion of being a rich country started to crumble: no childcare, no unemployment benefits, no healthcare, no way to bury the dead, no ventilators, but also no masks.

Speaker 1: We have systems that are set up to be necropolitical—that don't care if they work us to death. You would think that we would need better scholarship and teaching, but at the same time, we're sort of revealing ourselves to be completely incapable of responding to anything—even in the basic sense of keeping students, staff, and faculty safe and alive.

Speaker 2: Higher ed severed my relationships with my hometown, my family. It severed my personal relationships because moving and uprooting five times in three years ruins any relationship. Precarity and stress ruin relationships. I'm not built for working the way this system wants me to work.

One of the things, one of the statistics that stood out to me: imagining a huge 747 jet plane crashing every single day—every single day, this massive plane just crashes. I couldn't even hold on to any other image to comprehend the amount of death that was happening.

Speaker 1: Everyone who doesn't seem to have that personal connection seems incapable of understanding what is happening. It's similar to other disasters—the earthquake in Haiti or Hurricane Maria. I struggle a lot, both as an anthropologist and as an advocate, ally, accomplice with how to make people care. I'm not sure if there is a way to make people care if they're not directly impacted, if their own social network is not one or two degrees separate from the thing. Is it possible to make people care enough to do something?

Speaker 2: That resonates with me. I feel that you've articulated for me one of the main motivations for why I would want to keep doing my job, which is to try to make people care. I hope that one of the values of anthropology can be to make people care. As feminist ethnographers, we can draw on

experiences from the margins to make knowledge that can provide people with insights they don't otherwise have.

COVID has been deadly and clarifying—COVID has clarified my priorities and my values.

The Twists and Turns of Our Collective Narrative

A junior scholar reflected on the considerable negotiations within academia that overlap with the demands of family and young children. As with many early-career scholars, she was navigating the mobility required by the academy, figuring out how to plant roots when it was not clear how long she would be in a place. She hinted at the contradictions of gestating life in the midst of mass death.

Her concerns were echoed by another untenured scholar and parent of a child whose disabilities require considerable educational and social support. When COVID-19 shut down schools, she bore the burden of providing services that should be offered by the state, while enduring the vulnerability of being unable to carry on with the pace of academic life. She reflected on the gendered conditions of the labor of nourishment, being held responsible for shopping and cooking and preparing food. The idiom of nourishment, which was meant to replenish and restore, had begun to feel poisonous. She described finding all the work she was doing in the kitchen to be "the site of relentless obligation to the patriarchal state."

In an imaginary dialogue with Virginia Woolf (also referred to as "Anonymous") and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, an untenured scholar bemoaned a lack of leadership within her university and few possibilities for critique without risking her path to tenure. She alluded to feeling overlooked for career opportunities because of the time required to mother young children during a pandemic. Another untenured scholar described caring for her children, including her daughter who was born at the heart of the pandemic, and feeling the pressure to find happiness despite living in a society overruled by distorted values.

One mother who cared for two children as well as aging parents, while managing a chronic illness, described assuming even more responsibility amid structural failures within her academic institution. A mother of two teenage daughters chronicled the "COVID breakdowns" that afflict her and her family. While she is tenured, she related the constant pressures of being a woman in academia and in a patriarchal society. And, finally, in an abridged version of a longer conversation, one early-career scholar and a tenured professor reflected on how the pandemic has clarified values and priorities—as well as how much work remains to be done.

The reflections above illustrate how the act of processing with each other through duoethnography facilitated the transformation of our own individual burdens, concerns, anxieties, and worries into a collective narrative in which we are seen and heard without the risk of retaliation by our institutions. Shedding light onto the limits of the institution while also negotiating contracts, promotion, and relocations is still a tenuous process. Our insights from this process are not aimed at illustrating a clean, homogeneous, coherent, or smooth process of transformation. Rather, we found that interviewing each other about our strained working environments generated complex, ambivalent, and uncomfortable feelings. In our discussion about the interviews and the writing afterward, many of us expressed ambivalence about the transformative practice that we were engaged in as well as the urgency of exploring duoethnography as a transformative praxis. We share some of that discussion below.

"She raised the issue of ambivalence. I think it's important to deal explicitly with the privilege of this particular practice we've engaged. At the same time, I think there is something valuable

in the experiment as a counterweight to the isolation of the academy. This is what women and BIPOC scholars have been doing for generations—the unpaid labor of supporting others to make the academy a more livable place. Our support practices are both essential to our success (for me at least) and a function of our privilege. I think about how nourishing this group has been in the face of an academy that starves others."

"I also am struggling with wrapping my head around the overall message of this collective narrative and its timing. I just donated to yet another GoFundMe for funeral expenses. . . . It is a really difficult time to be a caregiver and an academic, and yet I'm alive and so are my family members. . . . I'm just not sure it's resonating for me right now when it seems like even staying alive is an unearned privilege I did nothing to deserve."

"I also feel guilty that my family is doing well—my kid loves online school, we have a full-time nanny now, mostly to play with our four-year-old. I love the time I'm getting with the baby. But I feel awful when I think about how much we have and how many others are suffering."

"I think I'm like others here and writing is cathartic for me now."

"This is one of the many reasons that I'm so deeply grateful for this group—remembering these experiences, realizing they speak across a collective, and using them as inflection points for enacting something different."

"Has our attempt to practice a trickster-like, radical care been successful?"

"Is this a useful method for catalyzing transformation, for creating alternative worlds?"

The process of duoethnography was often challenging, as we weighed the demands of our caregiving obligations and careers alongside the constant grief and loss. COVID-19 has presented us with the challenge of attending to the mundane details of life amid the horror of crisis. Some of us have kitchen windows that open up to skies filled with smog, brought about by the number of bodies flowing through the crematoria. The children crying in the background and food burning on the stove might feel insignificant in comparison to the specter of death that has surrounded us: and yet the food must be cooked and the children comforted. The contradictions that we are living as we grapple with our relative privilege and precarity are ultimately central to this essay and to our struggles that underlie our desire to write.

Over the several months that we have carried out this experimental research, we have debated the merits of sharing our process with others. Some of what we have shared with each other we will not, and cannot, share publicly. In part, this is because even with this degree of anonymity, it may not be safe but, also, there was something gained in the act of carrying out the research with each other that was nourishing in its own right and not meant for reproduction. We have ultimately decided to publish our experiment in duoethnography—itself a term in progress—as transformative praxis. It is our hope that this feminist practice of collective interviewing, and co-writing, will help others to transform their experiences within strained environments into a collective practice that emphasizes not individual survival but mutual support in academic communities. We understand transformation as an aspirational continuous experience and not as a quick fix, or an attempt at clean resolution. The duoethnography was not possible without first building on a network of trust and care among us. In many ways, the transformative experience started even before the idea of a writing exercise crossed our minds. For many of us, the transformative effects of the duoethnography also lie ahead of us as we continue to listen and accompany each other through our grief, loss, victories, and gains.

Acknowledgement

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