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Dialogues for equity: precarious parent-scholars in times of crisis

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified inequities around parent-scholars in the neoliberal gig academy. This paper documents the stories and intersectional struggles of four precarious parent-scholars as they navigated doctoral work, dissertation defenses, research, remote teaching, and family life during the pandemic. We illustrate how we navigated our neoliberal subjectivities and the extending multifold crises around the division of labor between academic work and parenting, gender roles, and internalized pressures exacerbated by a public postsecondary education system that exploits increasingly precarious workforces. Through critical collaborative autoethnography, we reflect on our parenting and teaching from March 2020 to August 2021. Drawing from our collective findings we summarize three mutually interdependent areas of communicative intervention that can make our workplace more equitable, entailing self-reflection, negotiation of labor, and collaborative dialogue.

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All: Introduction

We are four early career parent-scholars, former graduate students, and contingent instructors from the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University (SFU), currently employed at other institutions on short-term or multi-year contracts or looking for jobs. We come from diverse geographic locations, but despite our individual situations, our precarity during the pandemic united us. In this paper, we reflect back and document the conflicted overlapping of our teaching, writing, and parenting experiences. Our dialogues force us to confront our privileges as well as precarities. As we co-write sections, engage in dialogues, and present individual vignettes, the larger picture of structural inequity reveals itself. By putting forward our combined voices we forge an activism against the intrinsic disparities in academia and invite others alike to join us in making our workplace more equitable, transforming the universities and, by extension, the structures of exploitation.

Anis Rahman left a secure job and a joint family in Bangladesh to pursue higher education (HE) in the UK, Canada, and America only to fall into a deeper vortex of

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uncertainty in the North American job market, dragging along his spouse and their nine-year-old daughter and four-year-old son. Byron Hauck, a European mutt, is married to a woman from North-East China and is raising a biracial five-year-old daughter. He defended his dissertation during the pandemic and has been moving from one short-term contract to another since graduating. Nicole Stewart comes from mixed-European roots and is raising a seven-year-old son and five-year-old daughter with her Indo-Canadian husband. Her parental life is mired by juggling multiple roles as a doctoral candidate, an instructor, and Research Assistant (RA) at SFU, and splitting instructor jobs between two universities. Betty Ackah and her husband, both Ghanaians, have two sons who were born during her PhD program. Upon graduation, she continued various research projects in contractual roles.

We are *all* precarious and contingent instructors, researchers, and parents. By contingent instructors we refer to non-tenure-track, non-permanent, and precariously employed instructors. We are usually hired and paid on a contingent basis, for a semester/course or a renewal of contract with no guarantee of continuation or just a one-off gig (Stewart et al., 2021). Such hiring is usually subject to student enrollment and/or project funding. The nature of our precarity may vary markedly from institution to institution or from one instructor to another as they move from one place to the next. There are instances where institutions renew contracts, instill promotions, and/or 'regularize' their contract teachers as tenure-track or permanent faculty members. There are rare cases where contract instructors are eligible for conference travel grants or even minor research funds. However, in most cases, teaching is the only source of income. Instructors like us comply with contingency as parenting prolonged our graduation and our funding package as graduate students ended.

During the pandemic, HE has confronted student attrition and reduced revenue, resulting in deeper-and-deeper staffing cuts that make it essential, even if risky, to critique the pandemic-university (Khoo et al., 2021). The pandemic sent shockwaves to economies and employment, propelling grief, stress, and panic to families. While all types of academic appointees were affected, our previous work (Stewart et al., 2021) shows how contract instructors were the least protected from the ravaging storm, propelling a series of technological, social, psychological, and material nightmares. It is urgent for parent-scholars to interrogate the deeply embedded structural problems in HE that perpetuate existing inequities and invisiblize the labor of caregiving faculty (Raygoza et al., 2020). In this paper we forge a critique of educational inequity in terms of how our teaching contracts and labor are treated. We identify three areas of applied communication including self-reflection, negotiation of labor, and collaborative dialogue aimed at transformative social justice in HE.

Through critical collaborative autoethnography, we reflect on our parenting and teaching from March 2020 to August 2021. We use critical autoethnography as an intersectional research method that connects culture and communication (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Schwartzman, 2020). Through personal experiences and interactive interviews (Ellis et al., 2011), we use embodied writing to produce 'a collaborative theorizing of experience' (Alexander et al., 2019, p. 340). While autoethnography is underutilized in applied communication research (Tillmann, 2009), Dutta and Basu (2018) illustrate how critical and decolonial autoethnography is a dialogical tool to challenge and dismantle the power of the U.S.-based and Anglo-Saxon/Asian academic institutions. We use

our collaborative voices to draw from and contribute to the interdisciplinary field of critical university studies (CUS) with an activist stance. Gill's (2016) autoethnographic work addresses how the shift from relatively secure work to poorly paid, informal, and discontinuous employment leads to 'chronic anxiety and stress brought about by long hours, high costs of traveling, and the inability to plan ahead because of endemic insecurity about one's position' (p. 44). Our work testifies to the distress contingent parent-scholars face, especially during a public health crisis, and the myth of social security for educators at a so-called high-ranking university in a high-income country.

Self-reflective collaborative dialogues by graduate parent-scholars can 'deconstruct hegemonic power structures, build inclusionary environments, and create innovative work-life practices and policy applications for themselves, their families, and other members of [the] academe' (Long et al., 2018, p. 239). Contingent faculty urgently need to add their voices to scholarship (Stewart et al., 2021) to illuminate work-life negotiations for parent-scholars. In contrast to the neoliberal ideology of individual enterprising, we are motivated by ethical, legal, and political imperatives of faculty alliances (Petrina & Ross, 2014). We are aligned horizontally with other precarious parent-scholars and vertically with all educators in demanding more equitable, fairer, and respectful workplace policies. Our research imposes the gaze of heteronormative families, and we recognize we have colleagues who are struggling academic workers oppressed by heterosexuality, ableism, or non-conforming gender preferences. Our heteronormativity delineates our work, but nevertheless, illustrates the fragility, vulnerability, and emasculation of our relative privileges within the neoliberal system (Carter & Legleitner, 2021). We acknowledge that our work largely draws upon U.S.-Canada-centric literature, which remains a limitation of this study. We hope that other scholars will contextualize their suffering based on their geocultural locations and relate to the overarching need for social change.

Critical university studies: a response to the neoliberal gig academy

Anis: Why do you want to publish, Nicole?
Nicole: I'm trying to get my research into the world before the next job hiring cycle.
Anis: Well, how will you manage parenting two little ones if you have to go far for a tenure-track position?
Nicole: We're probably looking at a long-term back-and-forth commute, defying any pandemic …
Anis: Ah! I'm doing that for a non-tenure-track job. It's not fun at all. Welcome to an immigrant's rootless life!

Anis and Nicole: As precarious parent-scholars, we experience the conditions of neoliberal subjectivity. Despite marginalization, contingent instructors are idealized as entrepreneurial subjects and characterized by our capacity to maximize our academic capital (Vazquez & Levin, 2018). Neoliberal universities not only accrue a perennial struggle for reappointment, tenure, and promotion by women, immigrants, and faculty of color (Palko et al., 2020), but also foist a 'culture of compliance' (Lidinsky, 2020, p. 31) upon contingent faculty and graduate instructors. We comply with the hierarchy as we internalize mantras of neoliberalism, including self-entrepreneurialism, competitiveness, individual responsibility, and ambition (Gill, 2016; Scharff, 2016). We

deploy our entrepreneurial self as a tool to reconstitute our subjectivity and negotiate the making of ourselves, so we are competitive in the marketplace, despite the numerous systemic exclusionary forces at play (Scharff, 2016). The entrepreneurial self is defined by autonomy, masculinity, and normative Whiteness, and reveals discourses that are constraining, particularly for women who require solutions to problems at home and work (Gill & Ganesh, 2007). While acknowledging the micro-psychical motivation of entrepreneurial subjectivity helps us dive deeply into our soul, we must go beyond individuality and locate our agency (and failure) in the macro context of structural and hierarchical power politics that shape our dreams and nightmares.

CUS interrogate the effects of neoliberal policies on HE institutions (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018; Petrina & Ross, 2014), often critiquing power, control, and inequality in largely western universities (Morrish, 2020). CUS is characterized by its 'activist positioning against neoliberalization, managerialism, and the proliferation of audit cultures' (Khoo et al., 2021, p. 84). Many scholars address the link between the neoliberalization of universities and the transformation towards increasingly precarious workforces (Giroux, 2013; Nzinga, 2020). Angus (2012) argues the corporatization of university systems is a result of the gradual decline of post-World War Two welfare states in the West and the compromise between the state, workers, and capital in the neoliberal global political-economic order, in which the state overwhelmingly supports capital.

Consequently, the 'publicly funded' education system has turned into a 'publicly assisted' edu-factory, where administrators resort to using more-and-more part-time, non-tenure-track instructors to mitigate tuition increases (Hanke & Hearn, 2012, p. 11). This arrangement of 'adjunctification' or 'uberization' produces a systematic elimination of tenure, placing teaching duties on adjuncts employed without benefits or job security, but under the same pressures to integrate technologies, adapt to outsourcing, and shoulder administrative costs (Briziarelli & Guillem, 2021; Kezar et al., 2019; Wyman, 2021).[1] SFU, for example, is a modernist dream of a public university sitting atop a mountain, earning the reputation of Berkeley North. However, 50 years later, SFU and the University of California at Berkeley are now 'systematically defunded public postsecondary education systems' with sky-high tuition, intensifying corporatization, and expanding precarious workforces (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012, p. 3). This corporatization of university is pervasive in the United States (Dutt-Ballerstadt & Louis, 2022).

Contingent faculty (i.e. non-tenure-track, contractual, limited-term, non-permanent, adjunct, and grad student employees) are the most vulnerable type of instructional staff accounting for over 50 percent of the postsecondary teaching labor force in North America (Rose, 2020), and a staggering 70 percent of college faculty in the United States (Kezar et al., 2019) – a disturbing figure that the Netflix show *The Chair* failed to represent. Adjunct instructors overwhelmingly belong to marginalized groups, with women from all racial backgrounds and people of color least likely to be employed in full-time tenure-track positions (Nittle, 2022; Nzinga, 2020). Combating this leaky pipeline, ideal graduate workers must 'be perceived as competitive, adhering to standards, and autonomous in activities valued by the academy' (Long et al., 2018, pp. 225–231). Among them, precarious parent-scholars require additional flexibility including more equitable policies to avoid losing healthcare benefits (or visa status).

CUS helps deconstruct the motivation of our entrepreneurial performativity through critical self-reflective vignettes at the intersections of our racialized, gendered, parental, and intercultural identities. It exposes how, owing to the precarious nature of our contracts, our entrepreneurial self is so eager to be exploited at any depth, priming us to alienate ourselves from family, friends, and a meaningful life in exchange for a more secure institutional self (George, 2012). This paper maps how these two *becomings* clash and foreclose.

While the emerging CUS field addresses these issues, from a cursory look, few appear to be written or voiced by contingent faculty.[2] Perhaps this proves the point that although contingent faculty are the majority, they are not empowered or privileged enough to unite, collaborate, and make their voices heard. Addressing this gap, our work examines the intensification of inequities faced by parent-scholars during the pandemic due to pre-existing gendered, parental, and racialized social relations that thrive in the precarious and exploitative working conditions of neoliberal university systems. We articulate our individual self-reflection and collective perspectives as forms of communicative interventions. We register our interconnections through collective concerns and voices to co-create a subaltern space (Dutta & Basu, 2018) of self-reflexive dialogue, collective empowerment, and calls for reform and resistance as a form of communicative intervention.

Anis: Dancing with rootlessness and alienation in the gig academy

Mother: When are you coming home?
Anis: … … (silence)
Mother: Are you doing okay?
Anis: … … … (silence)

Pedagogy of the Oppressed advocated for the idea of dialogue, treating students with love, humility, care, and respect for their points of view (Freire, 2017). The pandemic laid bare its human cost for the parent-teachers, who had to occasionally choose between caring for students or their kids. Domestic labor and academic communicative labor (Gist-Mackey et al., 2021) are two different social institutions that illustrate a visible and material separation between how the labor of caring is performed with kids at home and students in a classroom – a separation that evaporated during the pandemic work-from-home environment. When the practice of exploitative communicative labor meets the tradition of unpaid domestic caregiving work, only one can win – the one that pays rent. Teachers exercising the pedagogy of the oppressed become oppressed by the pedagogy. We become our own oppressor as we comply with the bigger structural oppression, not only because we love our job, but also because we are structurally and contractually pre-conditioned to say 'yes' to scavenging leftovers. A contractual instructor like myself is inclined to stockpile any kind of work as my employment security means life or death for my extended family that I support in Bangladesh. Taking up more classes is ironically the way I simultaneously emancipate and alienate myself (George, 2012).

While academia is a relatively privileged industry compared to many, for the contractual bottom liners who are the majority it is a wasteland of zombies roaming around without any purpose or recognition of being alive. We share a thread of intersectional precarity

with contractual workers across various industries. As a privileged brown immigrant from the Global South residing at the margin of the Global North, I warn myself:

> Wallowing in our own performed position of how difficult it is as Brown academics to navigate the Whiteness that marks our discipline, we present ourselves as the margins, marking out often-profitable positions for ourselves, and simultaneously concealing much-needed conversations on social class and inequalities within postcolonial spaces. (Dutta & Basu, 2018, p. 85)

My compliance with the bureaucracy of the gig academy deepens subalternity and precarity. All these precarious conditions interweave into growing inequalities and insecurities in the neoliberal academy (Briziarelli & Guillem, 2021; Kezar et al., 2019). We are all disposable, but the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) contingent faculty members are the most disposable (Carter & Legleitner, 2021; Nzinga, 2020). A BIPOC entrepreneurial-self must further compete against the mobility of Whiteness in North–South academic networks and the Communication field is no different as evidenced by the growing dialogues around #CommunicationSoWhite (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Dutta, 2020). It's even harder for international students of color from the Global South to stand out, compete, and be heard when the curricula in the majority of classrooms perpetuate and reproduce White supremacy, further devaluing and marginalizing non-Anglophonic and Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems (Mohammed, 2022). While our racialized body is 'subjected to intense and persistent white violence through which we must fight to survive' (Khoo et al., 2021, p. 91), we must fight harder than our contingent counterparts as the pandemic hits people of color the hardest (Hill & Artiga, 2022).

The pandemic reorganized the meaning/value of labor in tech-dependent remote or hybrid teaching modes; however, behind the smart platforms and gadgets of EdTech Inc. (Mirrlees & Alvi, 2019), is the political economy of online work (Schwartzman & Carlone, 2010), the transformation and merger of two distinct social relations, and the ontological loss of what it means to be a domestically productive family member. Remote teaching shares home space but does not accommodate the conditions of a family, including childcare, elder care, disability care, or self-care. The cohabitation of teaching space–time-labor with parenting space–time-labor forces us to compromise on both. To keep up my contractual jobs, I work longer hours at night and during the afternoon when I'm supposed to spend time with my kids.

'Liar! You told us you'll do this and that, but you never do,' my daughter fiercely complains, reminding me that I still didn't fix her bike, after promising three times. Fortunately, she is happy enough with her collection of books to forget so many other things I promise but never deliver. Unfortunately, students are not that forgetful and often highlight every demand not met in course evaluation commentaries, as is evident in Nicole's register.

After dinner, my son enters my workroom and heads under the table, waiting patiently for me to take him to bed. How can I explain to him that my job is always on (Gill, 2016), that I have three pressing deadlines and several I have already missed? My mother, niece, nephew – all living seven thousand miles away – await a phone call from me, but I forget. The joint family, which once collectively defined my cultural soul and the social self, extends my pandemic woes. I'm distressed. I haven't seen my

mother for two years, but I'm more depressed about the book that is three years overdue. As the only earning person for a household of seven, I can't afford the risk of an infection or a tragedy while flying to my motherland – the only home with rivers within rivers, clouds atop clouds, heavenly Monsoon raindrops, and with care, tears, and food that nourished me for 25 years. The patriarchy and toxic-masculinity I embody doesn't allow me to share my tears. I sob alone, during the road trips through restriction-laden borders, which I must make for relocating my family again, yes, again, on a continual journey that has no tenure.

My solitude deepens. The dark circles around my eyes continue to get darker and wider. Acquaintances mistake me for a full professor looking at my shading gray hair and sprawling wrinkles over my face. Sleeping pills don't work anymore. I continue to lose self-esteem and confidence due to not being able to meet research deadlines as online teaching demands more-and-more time. I see the currency of my ten-year research slowly fading away and my dense teaching schedule entirely devaluing, sabotaging, and eating up my research.

All: How dare we dream of research?

Anis: The demise of researcher identity is perhaps the most common tragedy among the parent-instructors-teaching-forever-to-pay-rent population group. The majority of caregiving academics like us are trapped in a vicious cycle – we can't do research because we don't have time *and* we can't get hired as tenure-track professors because we don't have research or grants.

Nicole: The system squeezes us between teaching and research at all stages of our academic careers but publishing as a parent-scholar on a teaching contract often means sacrificing time with our kids at the expense of unpaid labor for research.

Betty: Exactly! How can *we* be obsessed with publications when we are taking on so many classes to teach, but barely make enough money to survive?

Byron: Do you remember our friend who, while working as an instructor, had to go all the way up to the dean-provost-president office to get maternity leave for one semester, and shortly after she left academia for a public service job?

Betty: Why should she have to go through that entire process? Bear in mind that you can't even plan on when to have kids, especially women who are grad students – the system will screw you over twice. And forget about going to international conferences while carrying kids like a kangaroo in your sack.

Nicole: Before the pandemic, I didn't go to a single out-of-town conference because I had no childcare. Why did it take a pandemic to discover hybrid options?

Anis: What do you think we can do about it?

Nicole: Guaranteed travel grants for parents, childcare at conferences, equitable assessment protocols by hiring committees, and subsidized on-campus childcare would help.

Byron: We need more dialogical spaces.

Anis: How do we shift our current circumstances for those who want to both teach and do research, not one at the expense of the other?

Nicole: We need to stop with band-aid-like solutions and mandate legislated reform and institutional policies that produce actionable racial and gender equity for parents.

Betty: We also need policies that assist international student parent-scholars. Marginalized scholars are ignored in regulatory frameworks. It is imperative to appreciate their embeddedness in the intersection of identities and experiences (Crenshaw, 2013, 2017).

Byron: Masculinity, fatherhood, and partnership as a scholar in lockdown

COVID-19 lockdown measures resulted in the closure of my daughter's daycare and the start of my partner's work-from-home. I laughed when I saw an email saying we would be refunded for the missed daycare due to the lockdown. 'Honey!' I called towards the bedroom. No answer. My daughter looks up from coloring, 'MOM!' I look back in haste, 'No, don't yell, she is probably on a work call.' I go to our bedroom door to peek in, but she is busy, so I head back to my computer, happy with some good news, and focused on getting back to work.

The public, as an outlet from private life, vanished, leaving me crammed into a dual-purpose live/workspace in the confines of our 750-sqft social housing apartment. Between tending to my child and listening to my wife on the phone, I struggle to work. I grapple with the first chapter of my dissertation, only writing 800-words. My window for daily work is looming. I need to meet my daily goal so I can reach my goal of graduating – further complicated by the need to sell my labor, raise a child, navigate daily life, and find comfort in the subjectification of my economic position. My overdue grading tasks, fragile job security, housing uncertainty, and White masculinity all scream out loudly of problems much larger than my entrepreneurial remorse for not being able to produce more writing.

'Honey? Have you gotten something out for dinner yet?' my partner asks.

My thoughts and fingers stop mid-sentence. I quickly jot down a few key words to be able to continue the line of thought I was on, barking, 'What's that?!'

Hostility rises. The break in concentration feels unjust. I stop and answer, interpreting a presumption of responsibility. I'm angry that the interruption occurred while I was midway through typing. I repeat my admonishment that talking to me while typing is like startling someone out of a dream and so please DO NOT DO THAT. I answer with a dejected sigh and then look back at my work. My heart is pounding, and I stare at the screen that was once an extension of me. Now, it is just an object with electrons bouncing into my eyes. I look at the sliding glass door. I shrug and get up to go out to my balcony to take a break.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown measures, I was teaching one class and making less than my partner who is a receptionist. The uncertainty of the lockdown coupled with the unstable nature of university work, left me relieved to discover that I was hired to teach for the summer semester. The desk in my bedroom became a hot seat, with my partner leaving its quiet seclusion at 4:30 and me jumping into it right after to prepare for a 5:30 pm class. During the class break, I would go see my family in the middle of dinner. 'Daddy, I miss you, can you eat with us?' My daughter asks forlornly. 'No honey I'm still working, I will say goodnight to you though,' I say rushing back to the workspace.

By the time I finish, teeth are brushed, stories are read, and I look at my partner who is tired from her day. The goodnights are extended, and then we leave my daughter to go to sleep. We don't talk much, trying to give her quiet in our small living space. I go to the kitchen to wash dishes, putting on headphones. My partner pokes her head in to let me know my mom called.

'About what?' I am bothered by the interruption from my thoughts that had drifted back to my work. 'She wanted to know if we need any money, I said no we've got it

figured out,' my partner replies. 'Fine, good. Do I need to do anything or call her?' I ask. My voice tinged with annoyance. 'No' my partner replies walking away as she recognizes my frustration. I walk to her 'I'm sorry honey I was busy thinking about my dissertation, I didn't mean to snap.' 'It's okay' she says, 'Thanks for taking care of the kitchen.'

I hide my difficulty in being present in relationships with chores. Financial support from my family and the state let me experiment with my masculinity to try and be an involved father and equitable partner (Lund et al., 2019). Juxtaposed with the financial necessity to work while I finish my degree, and complete research that is necessary to advance my career as a scholar, I struggle with liminality. My romanticization of the sacrifices I was making to be a scholar (Manky & Saravia, 2022), clashed with my attempts to be a more progressive male leading me to rely on the privileges of white masculinity rather than doing the work to overcome them.

Byron: What I recognized in your story of the difficulties in understanding how to be a father is our shared lack of a means to deal with the question: What do we do when we fail to meet ideals?

Anis: I wish I had the support you had so the grandparents could take care of the kids when our dissertation, teaching, and marriage are in tatters.

Byron: I am privileged to live and work in my home country. This gives my precarity a safety net, I can aim to be a scholar despite its precarity. But I still struggle with what it means to be dependent while believing I have something to contribute as a scholar. There is a touch of masculine narcissism in taking my family on this journey.

Anis: It's not simple narcissism, but the globalizing positionality of neoliberalism you struggle against. Let's keep in mind that our male insecurity pales in comparison to what immigrant colleagues and mother Betty, Nicole, and many graduate student-instructors like Santos (2016) have been going through – a system that is exploitative, abusive, and unjust (Gulli, 2009).

Nicole: Systemic gender inequity in the ivory tower

It's March 2014 and I have an infant strapped to my chest in an Ergo carrier. I did not take maternity leave, so I'm foolishly running my PR firm at full tilt while I await graduate school decision letters. I walk into the campus director's office at the college where I'm an instructor. She looks up at me after a three-month leave and says, 'It was so hard to schedule classes with you gone. It would have been easier if you hadn't been away.' My jaw almost hit the floor. In addition to feeling like a bad employee, breastfeeding rhetoric made me feel like a bad mother. My son was born with torticollis and could not turn his head. It left me in a position where I needed to pump at work, but no accommodations were made. Instead, the buzz of a Medela breast pump rang through the bathroom stalls, where students constantly joked about the noise. It was completely demoralizing. And forget trying to change diapers at work – there were no change tables. My return to teaching after having my first child highlights how systemic gender inequity has plagued HE long before the pandemic. The professional structures in universities restrict employment, careers, and leadership opportunities for women (Allen et al., 2021). As a result, women leave HE at alarmingly high rates, while men, rather unremarkably, remain (Winslow & Davis, 2016).

A year later, in 2015, I was a graduate student and Teaching Assistant (TA) at SFU when our daughter was born three weeks early. It wasn't the baby that kept me up at night; but rather, a constant worry that the decision to grow my family might render me an academic failure. My professor let me bring my newborn to class, which meant the patriarchy didn't kill my dreams of grad school, but it sure kicked my ass in the evaluations. Evaluation comments repeated sentiments like, 'Nicole is sweet and organized. I felt that she graded the assignments and midterm more difficult than usual … Perhaps it was due to her imbalanced hormone levels due to her pregnancy.' These gender-biased evaluations made me sick to my stomach.

Betty: That's terrible!

Nicole: This is why women leave academia before they hit a tenure-track stream (Durodoye et al., 2020).

Betty: Yes, there are no supports, no concessions. The needs we have as mothers are not considered and if they are conscious of it, they think we should suck it up.

Nicole: I also feel an internal pressure to keep up with research, to keep up with teaching, and to keep up my academic story, what most people refer to as a C.V. – a neoliberal self-branding technology of the self.

Betty: Honestly, it is not fair. Being aware of how much I have to achieve in a certain timeframe. I don't know why anyone wants us to live like that. To be working at this pace only to be unwell?

Nicole: I'm always trying to get the next gig and do it as well as I can, but I'm always worried that it's not enough.

Betty: Do you think men have to worry as much as we do?

Nicole: No. There is so much scholarship that says they don't (Allen et al., 2021; Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Rosa & Clavero, 2022). And that's the issue. It's an unlevel playing field. I do recognize that I'm privileged as a result of being White so I know it must be harder on you. What is it like being a Black mother in HE?

Betty: It's gut-wrenching. People constantly have low expectations of you. People are shocked that you are in academia. Little hits come at me all the time and they chip away at my soul. Why should anyone be surprised? What is so shocking?

Nicole: Betty, that sounds like implicit racism?

Betty: It is. I used to let it slide, but then I would ask people what is so shocking? When you put people on the spot, they don't have the words. It happens all the time.

Nicole: Betty, what is the worst form of racism that you've experienced in HE?

Betty: It was in the U.S.A. and students rejected my teaching because they didn't understand why an African woman was teaching them. That's what they said in my evaluations. You also experienced sexist and discriminatory evaluations. The pandemic exacerbated the disadvantages women already endure.

Nicole: Communicative labor and the erosion of 'market value'

My communicative and emotional labor during remote teaching has been immense. Communicative labor illustrates how communication itself, such as listening, speaking, and writing is a form of labor (Gist-Mackey et al., 2021). Emotional labor is the work of attending to my student's emotional concerns, physically or remotely, while also managing my own emotions. Studies show that instructors are performing more-and-more emotional labor during the pandemic and student emotional management is disproportionately offloaded onto BIPOC cisgender men/women, white cisgender women, and gender non-conforming faculty compared to cisgender tenured men

(Berheide et al., 2022). However, contingent faculty who are already exhausted with parental emotional labor, must walk additional miles to accommodate this labor to ensure students want us back the following semester.

The metatheoretical argument around communicative and affective labor shows how emotion, compassionate communication, and gendered work inform the experience of critical women scholars. My students come online to tell me they feel scared or lonely. About how they've flown home to be with their families in China or India. Some students tell me they have lost their jobs and don't know how they will pay for tuition or support their families. One day in March 2021, a student logged into office hours on Zoom and talked to me for 45-minutes. She told me about the stress of flying home to be with family in India and about her father who was sick with COVID-19 in the room next to her. She told me about the devastation the virus unleashed in India. I've seen it on the news and my heart is in my stomach just listening to her. I internalize my students' problems and emotions as if they are my own. I toss and turn in bed, feeling helpless, and cry myself to sleep.

I have taught 17 classes split between two institutions since the start of the pandemic, and this type of communicative labor seems to appear over and over again, and yet it is invisible to my employers. In a third-year course I taught over Zoom, my students learned about teaching for freedom and liberation, employing critical thinking skills, student-centered learning, and dialogic spaces (Freire, 2017). In the process, I found myself taking stock of the situation: I was teaching pedagogies *of* the oppressed *to* the oppressed *by* the oppressed *for* the oppressors who pay my meager salary. My employers know I do good work, but the reality is, even great work may not lead to a tenure-track position, which means as my time closes in on graduate school, I will need to make hard decisions that may separate my family–at least for a time–in the interest of finding work. Mobility is hard on women, as Betty attests below.

Betty: 'Things fall apart; the center cannot hold' (Achebe, 1958; Yeats, 2000)

Migration patterns from many Global South countries to the Global North are based on aspirations for the often-referenced greener pastures. I want to expand this line from a daughter, a mother, and an African international graduate student's perspective as we barely get the chance to speak! Geographical mobility is highly related to social mobility (Goodman, 2019), and home communities expect to benefit from members being in wealthier economies. Although I was a student and not a migrant-worker, I still experienced these expectations. Unfortunately, the pathway to economic sustenance during graduate school was tumultuous at best. Becoming a parent compelled me to forego teaching positions because I could not afford childcare and didn't have the luxury to attend classes/tutorials. Consequently, I worked on lower-paying online courses or RA work. I could not be a sessional instructor, which meant I lost out on gaining relevant teaching experience necessary to further my employment. No wonder Black women like me are less likely to be hired as tenured faculty (Nzinga, 2020).

My husband's financial support is substantial in relation to his income, but nominal considering the conversion rate from Ghana cedis into Canadian dollars. Indeed, the

insecurity of RA positions kept me in a constant state of anxiety. A TA position is precarious because they are only secure for one semester, but an RA is not even guaranteed work for a semester. COVID-19 obliterated 'normal circumstances' in the middle of my RA project on health professionals. The research ground to a halt, along with my income stream. It was an absolute fright. Eventually, through my supervisor's intervention and my eligibility for the government emergency programs, the tightening in my chest from financial concerns slowly eased up.

Progressing my dissertation was one of the few things that helped me cope with stress and regain a sense of purpose. The shutdown measures in 2020, however, threatened to eliminate the flimsy appearance of succeeding at scholarship that I was grasping onto. My younger son had heart surgery in January of that year. While I stayed with him in the hospital during his recovery, my mother-in-law came from Ghana to be with my older son at home. The flight cancelations and airport closures derailed her return. It confined two adults who did not really know each other and two toddlers who were unwell and bored into a tiny two-bedroom unit. The cacophony of fear, tantrums, and anxiety was deafening.

SFU proudly displays diversity with its slogan, 'Engaging the World.' Beyond the pecuniary benefits of numerous international students, the complimentary welcoming image, and the cheap labor, academic institutions fail in ensuring support systems that adequately address their diverse needs (Skachkova, 2007). Universities burden international student mothers with the 'policies and arrangements that place the distribution of material, social and academic resources on students' ability to network in unequal social environments' (Lobnibe, 2013, p. 201). While academia developed on the exigencies of a White male unencumbered with family obligations (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), the expectations and markers for success are the same for everyone. The motherhood tax impedes the upward trajectory for mother-scholars (Lopez et al., 2020). The responsibility weighs even more heavily on women of color (Calisi, 2018). The neoliberal logic of hiring practices in HE makes no concessions for this Ghanaian parent-scholar who has had to contend with added barriers of racial displacement, sociocultural incompatibility, economic difficulties, and motherhood, (Lobnibe, 2013; Salami et al., 2020); yet I am a token of diversity.

I felt like Sissie from *Our Sister Killjoy* (Aidoo, 1994); although I appreciate the value of an international education, the dichotomy of my transient self-grappling with being a Ph.D. parent-scholar, while constantly feeling like I do not belong, is quite exhausting. I knew I could not fail. Even if I felt adrift from my family and wider community, the ultimate triumph of successfully getting a Ph.D. through the complexities of motherwork (Collins, 1994) and pandemic blues was our shared triumph.

Betty: Things began to fall apart more and more. In 2020, my father slid into early-stage dementia. I felt guilty for being too far away and unable to offer meaningful assistance.

Anis: The unbearable burden of guilt makes us feel like we aren't doing our duty to our parents and not getting the benefit of what the presence of parents (or extended family) provides. I hate not being able to be with my family continents away when they need me the most.

Betty: So true. I was living in constant dread that by the time the borders opened my dad or whatever memory he has left of me would be gone.

All: Practical implications

Given the intersectional nature of our struggle and resulting discussions, we engage in a range of communicative acts and interventions, such as communicative and emotional labor, dialogue, representation in decision-making, negotiation, self-reflexivity, identity, collaboration, and reimagination. From these, we discern three mutually interdependent areas of applied communication: self-reflection, negotiation of labor, and collaborative dialogue.

Our stories illustrate the White normativity affixed to the individualization of our current system (Myser, 2003) – a structure where contingent instructors embody a neoliberal subjectivity and comply with a forced entrepreneurial selfhood despite alienation of friends, family, and wellness in pursuit of an institutional self that is competitive in the gig academy. Our dialogues pose rhetorical questions that cannot be answered within the logic of their creations but point to the faults in the axioms of the system. It is clear to us that as long as there are a significant number of contingent faculty at the periphery of academia, there is no meaningful equity, diversity, or inclusion (Stewart et al., 2021).

Critical autoethnography as a *self-reflexive* method helps us to interrogate our own subjectivity and reach the answer to the soul-searching question: why do we want what we want and is it worth the suffering we must go through? At the same time, the discussion of CUS compels us to ask the broader and perhaps more important question: How did we arrive here in the first place? Our dialogues and vignettes show a fragmented system that is fractured and falling apart at the seams – and most certainly not designed for precarious parent-scholars like us. Women who choose to have children before they secure permanent positions are at a staggering disadvantage, which further illustrates problems in hiring and promotion practices. This disadvantage is further exacerbated for BIPOC, immigrant, and international student mothers like Betty, who had to care for her hospitalized child while also caring for her own parent suffering from dementia. What has academia ever done for them?

Why just us? Tenured-professors, administrators, editors, and international conference organizers (all beneficiaries of secure employment) need to be self-reflexive. Fixing this system would require building collective coalitions beyond the tenured and adjunct faculty divide. This takes us to the most tangible application part: *negotiation of labor*. Except for a few external grant-funded positions, a tenured professor's privilege to teach 2–2 and to do research primarily comes from the system of someone else (many of whom are contractual) teaching 3–3 or 4–4 or 3–3–2 or more classes. In many cases, graduate student-instructors do the exact same teaching work as a regular faculty member would but earn way less per course. Lawmakers must interrogate this wage inequality, both at the institution level and nationwide. Tenured professors have nothing to lose by supporting these instructors with course materials and advocating for them in departmental meetings and administrative bargains. Contingent faculty should not be asked to advocate for themselves, but they do require a seat at the bargaining table. Students too, should be aware of what contingent instructors go through, especially how vulnerable they are. The flyer circulated by Rutgers Adjunct Faculty Union (2021) puts it precisely: 'After all, their working conditions are our learning conditions! Join them in the fight for a just contract.'

University administrators, and policymakers (e.g. department chairs, deans, provosts, hiring, renewal, and promotion committee members) must consider how course

evaluations, renewal systems, and promotion or hiring practices for parent-scholars can become more equitable. Ahn et al. (2021) pointed out we need to 'shift away from individual approaches to resilience, instead building organization and community resilience in academia.' Academia is decades behind other sectors in family leave and accommodation policies. Academic caregivers are burdened with childcare, homeschooling, eldercare, and student-care. This must change.

Potential areas for systematic labor negotiation also extend to hiring, with a view to 'improve the representation of women in higher education, especially at senior levels, and to better reflect the diversity of female academics, including Indigenous women, women of color, women from non-English speaking backgrounds, and women with disabilities' (Allen et al., 2021). This also means changes in university legislations, fiscal planning, leadership and support, and the professional culture, such as norms and attitudes. This must not be left to the discretion of administration and supervisors: it must be inscribed in policy. Additionally, universities must be intentional about establishing pathways to permanence for contingent instructors. Indeed, changes in legislation and consequent actions that address aspects of contingency like job security and inadequate pay structures, work in the best interest of academia by enhancing academic freedom and improving the quality of education (Murray, 2019).

An obvious question one might ask is how university administrators can achieve these objectives within a neoliberal framework? Is a better life for precariat possible within a colonial, capitalist, and white supremacist academy without a radical transformation? Critical scholars have made it clear that it is not. BIPOC and women scholars at the margins must unite and forge a network of resistance, and if necessary, perform disobedience against silent injustices (Dutt-Ballerstadt & Bhattacharya, 2021). It must be part of a long-term goal, not some quick, band-aid solution. We need collective bargaining rights as well as networks of unions to bolster our campaigns and to coordinate our actions. We must try to recognize that these are not problems that can be solved by privatizing resilience and individualizing solutions. We need to re-interject the human logic into academia by collectively sharing the roots of human suffering. We must engage in reflexive dialogues and vocalize our suffering, so we all know what we are going through. Our paper shows how to instrumentalize autoethnography to achieve this purpose. The co-construction of our dialogues and vignettes affords us a form of empowerment. By using dialogues of equity as a communicative practice we can expose the vulnerabilities thrusted onto precarious parent-scholars. Academic institutions should draw upon positive and negative personal experiences from affected individuals and social groups to inform effective interventions (Long et al., 2018) and other precarious parent-scholars need to add their voices to scholarship. These measures can contribute to a discursive shift in focusing on the consequences of labor exploitation and serve as a communicative resistance against the neoliberalization of academia. This is not something we can achieve with our voices alone. We are four writing this paper, but we are far too many.

We must begin to act for change. Change that is anti-racist. Change that is anti-patriarchal. Change that can not only empower the heteronormative families documented here, but that provides holistic and collective shifts that enable all forms of families and individuals to flourish. These are not simple top-down policy shifts. Legislative changes might be the most practical for making our intersected concerns easier to live

with; however, revolutionary changes to the nature of our political communities are what will enable ideological shifts away from these vulnerabilities. What if every university offered free childcare to all parent-scholars – at all levels of the system? That would level the playing field to some extent. If the center cannot hold, it is up to us to make the change we wish to see in the academy.

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion on the neoliberal university's role in 'Uberizing' academia or reorganizing academic labor and gig economy in general, see Briziarelli & Guillem, 2021, p. 125; Cultural Workers Organize, n.d.).
2. For an extensive list of relevant works in this line, see Critical University Studies Resources (n.d.), https://criticaltheory.northwestern.edu/mellon-project/critical-theory-in-the-global-south/linked-inter-university-teaching-cooperations/critical-university-studies-resources.html and University and State (n.d.), Reading list, https://sites.uci.edu/universityandstate/reading-list/.

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