

A Lonely Discourse

ABSTRACT This performative text is a study of relationships at multiple levels. I ask readers to (re)consider the desire and possibility for connection in various types of relationships—romantic and intertextual as well as relationships between mothers and children, mothers and others, readers and writers, presence and absence. In relating my experiences of single motherhood, I raise questions about the possibility for creative communication scholarship—performative writing in particular—to perform the relational work of connecting us to others with whom we do not share similar life experiences or situations. **KEYWORDS** Relationships; Single mothering; Human connection; Couples; Performative writing

PROLOGUE

This essay began as a personal narrative on being alone, but as I wrote my story and connected it to the stories and ideas of others, I began to realize that it moves from an essay on being alone to one on being (in conversation) with others. I then began thinking about the fact that I am not just writing and thinking with others, but writing *to* others, which is another level of not being alone. Therefore, I can no longer call this piece by its original title, “On Being Alone.” Instead, I shall call it what it is, “A Lonely Discourse.”¹ This story and its author long for your presence, but since you are absent we will settle for your consideration . . . of both the story and the performance of the text.²

A LONELY DISCOURSE

The discourse of Absence is a text with two ideograms: there are the raised arms of Desire, and there are the wide-open arms of Need. I oscillate, I vacillate between the phallic image of the raised arms, and the babyish image of the wide-open arms.³

With her right hand, she reaches to turn the shower knob to the “off” position. The water ceases to pour over her now, though a steady drip, a couple of

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drops at a time, falls rhythmically from above. She stands there, hypnotized by the drip-drip beat of the faucet, lingering as the last cloudy vapors of warm steam rise up her legs, move across her torso, and finally caress her face gently.

(Drip-drip)

Barthes

She reaches back in her mind, trying to remember what it felt like to have the hands of another caressing her body, hands running through—maybe even pulling—her hair. She aches to feel the touch of soft lips against her lips, her cheek, the small of her back; aches to feel the comfort of strong arms surrounding her, pulling her in.

(Drip-drip)

She aches, aches . . . for someone else to make the bed, do the shopping, cook the meals, run the errands, and pay the bills.⁴ To do the worrying.

(Drip-drip)

Most of all, she aches to fold her body into soft, cool sheets. Aches to lay her head upon a cloudy pillow, eyes closing gently into a long, restful sleep.

(Drip-drip)

She reaches back, back, back as far as she can remember, but she can't remember the last time she's known any of these things. She'll have to settle for imagining them.

(Drip)

(Drop)

The drops drip more slowly, erratically, losing their rhythm. She reaches back with her left hand, and in one swift movement jerks open the shower curtain, and a rush of cool air shocks her back into the present. A present where she is alone.⁵

Alone.

Single.

Woman.

Frankfurt

The first time I saw you I fell in love instantly. Truth be told, I was already in love, already seriously and whole-heartedly committed before I ever laid eyes on you.⁶

The first time I held you in my arms I was mesmerized by your presence, captive to your gaze, unaware that I was exhausted and starving.⁷ You looked up at me with clear eyes and furrowed brow, and I gasped—momentarily winded from the depth and intensity of your expression, so profoundly contemplative. You said, "*You feel familiar, but I am still unsure about this, about us.*"

To this day you often tell me the same thing.

The first night we spent together, I was so nervous. I had not anticipated being so nervous. What I mean to say is that I was very nervous about the event itself, but didn't realize I'd feel this anxious after. I couldn't sleep so I watched you sleeping next to me for hours, monitoring the rise and fall of your chest, memorizing the minute details of your face, wondering if you would open your eyes and catch me watching you.

It took several hours, but sometime that night, probably around the third or fourth hour of my sleep-study of you, I finally recognized you.

It was *you*.

You, whose presence was first revealed in sensations of soft flutters,
whose perpetual hiccups prevented sleep on tired nights.

You, who I carried inside me for the past ten months,
who turned my world inside-out.

You, the love that had grown within me, a part of me;
the love that in turn made me grow.

It was *you*, my son.

Then, in a panic, afraid that you might not know me, I lifted you from the hospital bassinet and held you gently against my chest so that you could hear my heart beating and also recognize me.

For the first two weeks of your life, we slept in this way: me sitting propped-up in a recliner with your head against my heart. For the first two weeks it was the only way we could both rest.

Single woman.

Child.

Mother.

Single mother.

She, the single-mother, stands naked in front of the bathroom mirror after her shower, and as the fog clears from the reflective glass she can make out her body, a body that is starting to look to her like an old body. A body that mirrors the way she feels. Stretch marks, once an intense lavender now faded into an iridescent white, cover her breasts and belly. She cursed these marks when they started to appear during her pregnancy. Exploding brilliantly, the fluorescent striations raked and consumed the soft surfaces of her youthful body until it appeared foreign to her. She abhorred stretch marks and all the other aspects of pregnancy that separated her from her peers, marking her teenage body in ways

that teenagers shouldn't be marked: weight-gain, protruding midsection, swollen feet, gray hair.

But it was so many years ago that her body announced the truth of her situation in ways she could not conceal. Now, the faded marks are barely visible remnants of her teenage trauma and a muted memorial to what was perhaps the most miraculous experience of her life. Like the stretch marks, the other perceptible markers of her teenage pregnancy have faded from public view, though the reality of having a child so young, now invisible to almost everyone else around her, is still part of her daily experience.

She is living the part of teenage pregnancy that happens five, ten, fifteen years after the decision was made to keep the child. She is the story that happens after the afterschool special. They don't cover this part of the story in the afterschool special, or even on MTV's *Teen Mom*. Sure, everyone knows the story of the girl who gives up her childhood to raise a child of her own. But who really knows what happens after that, when the teenager grows up, becomes a woman? A woman who has been a mother ever since she was a child?

Single.

Woman.

Child.

Mother.

Single woman with child who mothers.

Single woman *with child* who mothers *alone*.

Today my life is like a scene from a movie—a montage scene with Gioachino Rossini's *William Tell Overture* playing in the background. Picture this: It's 8:00 a.m. and there's this single mom running around the house, trying to be in ten different places at one time. The day has just begun, but she's already frazzled. She's dressed for business in a sharp suit and heels, and from the neck down everything appears to be okay, but her hair gives her away. It's out of control. And in her haste to get the child up, dressed, and fed, she's forgotten to apply lipstick to her darkly-lined lips, leaving her mouth better suited for a Halloween costume party than her upcoming day of meetings with tax consultants and human resource managers. No matter, no time. They have to leave now or they'll be late.

Can you picture this? Except, imagine that it is you.

Ready. Set. Go!

- You drive through rush-hour traffic, spilling coffee in your lap in a futile attempt to wake up before you get to the office.
- You get the kid to school just in the nick of time, but by the time you arrive to work, you're late. You're running in.
- Things at work go badly:
 - You have to fire somebody.
 - You've been working six days a week, sixty hours a week for the last month and a half.
 - You're way behind. Things are slipping through the cracks left and right.
 - Even so, you're trying to have a good attitude about it, trying to keep up a good face.
- You work straight through lunch, hoping to leave early.
- At 4:30 p.m. you get sucked into a meeting even though you need to be out of there by 4:45 p.m. because you have this meeting at your son's school, which means:
 - You need to pick up the kid,
 - Get him home and fed and to the babysitter,
 - And then drive all the way back downtown (where his school is located conveniently next to your office) by 7:00 p.m.,
 - And the only way you can do all that is if you leave work by 4:45 p.m.
 - Of course, the meeting goes until 5:30 p.m.
- 5:30 p.m. hits:
 - You rush over to the kid's school,
 - You rush in to pick him up.
 - Some parent is standing in front of the aftercare sign-out sheet!
 - She's completely blocking access to it, asking questions about payments, the weather, and other trivial matters!?!
 - You try to interject, to go around her. This parent is unyielding.
 - Her payments have nothing to do with the sign-out sheet, but for some reason she finds it necessary to be directly in front of the form, fully controlling all access to it.
 - So now, another ten minutes have passed when the task of picking up the child should've taken only about two minutes.

You get your six-year-old into the car, strap him in, kiss him on the head, and he says, “Mom, I need to tell you something. The letter you made to Auntie Candice and Auntie Katie that contained all those pictures from our vacation, well, you accidentally sent it to school with my art supplies. Ms. Mary gave them back to me to give to you but I’m looking in my backpack and they’re not there. So, maybe somebody took them out or they fell out somewhere and if that happened who knows where they could be? Oh, and, I’ve got pee on my sock, and, it’s in my backpack too.”

“What?!”

“The pee sock. It’s in my backpack.”

“Son, which compartment of your backpack is it in?”

“You know, it’s in *the* compartment, with my lunchbox and my bottle of water.”

So now the kid has lost the pictures, which you can’t really blame on him because it’s only because you’re so scatterbrained that they got shoved in with his school supplies in the first place. You’re the one who actually delivered them to school, so essentially you’re the one who lost them. But you’re still kind of sad and bummed about that. Not only that, there’s a pee-on sock inside your kid’s backpack and it’s touching his lunchbox where you put the food that you send for him to school every day, and it’s touching the water bottle that he puts up to his mouth every time he needs to get a drink of water. So now you’ve got to sterilize the backpack. You’ve got to sterilize the lunchbox and the water bottle. You’ve got to wash the pee-on kid because the pee-on sock was obviously on his foot at one point in time, *and* you’ve to get this kid fed and delivered to the babysitter by 6:30 p.m. in time to get back to his school by 7:00 p.m.

You’re trying not to think about how the sock got pee on.

You’re trying not to think about the fact that *you* start school tomorrow and your whole day will consist of getting up at 5:00 a.m., getting ready for work, getting the kid up, getting him ready for and to school, getting yourself to work, working all day without a lunch and going straight from work to pick up the kid only to drop him off with a relative so that you can go straight to school and finally arrive home sometime around 10:00 p.m.

You’re trying not to think about the fact that you haven’t even purchased your books for school yet, that there’s no way you’ll have time to do it tomorrow, or the next day either because you have another class after work. You don’t even know which class it is you have tomorrow or where it is.

You’re especially trying not to think about the fact that you’ve only seen your son for a total of about 25 minutes today, and that 90 percent of that time

was spent in the car where you tried to talk to him about how his day went while also trying to return several important phone calls in between pauses in the conversation because you won't have another chance to do so before the day ends.

You're trying not to think about all these things because you're now driving on the freeway in rush-hour traffic, trying to pay attention to the traffic on the road, or rather, you're finding it necessary to pay attention to the traffic on the road. You're so distracted by the traffic on the road that you don't have time to question where the road is even taking you.

And from somewhere, maybe the backseat of the car or the back of your mind, you hear a voice asking, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

You look beside you at the empty seat.

You look at the rear view mirror and see your son.

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

And you respond, "Where are we going? And who is 'we'?"⁸

The single woman with child who mothers alone stands in front of the bathroom mirror blow-drying her wet, red hair. She is thinking about her life, love, and relationships.

She has made love on a sailboat at anchor under the light of the full moon; she has danced closely, seductively in the arms of the one she loved and also in the arms of strangers; she has cried out in ecstasy with words unformed to an audience of no one. She has heard people profess their love to her and has felt love in their gestures. In love she has known: a foreigner, a dancer, a scientist, a writer . . . but never a partner.⁹

F. R., R. L.

R. M., J. W.

K. N., M. S.

Flaubert

Barthes

Hardt and

Negri

Plath

You?

Single.

Woman.

Mother.

Single woman with child who mothers alone.

Single woman with child who mothers alone and is sometimes lonely.

People say things to her like: "Well, at least you have your son for company. At least you're not completely alone. You two are close, right?" As if her son, a child, makes for an equal companion. As if life as a single mom actually affords her any time to spend with her son.

A. B.

D. L.

She is anti-dependent.¹⁰

Gornick

That's what her therapist said. It's the opposite of co-dependent. It's when you rely on no-one. Or maybe it's not a real condition at all, but a pejorative

Cobb term by which to label someone who has no aspirations of meeting prince(ss) charming and living happily-ever-after. A way to let her know that something must be wrong with her if she does not desire marriage.¹¹

Her sister tells her that she can't imagine her sustaining a long-term relationship, anyway. "You're too idealistic or elitist, an intellectual snob." *I am not those things*, she thinks. *Am I those things? I love. I love!*

Too easily, I love.

Plath Other people tell her she thinks too much about her son; perhaps she loves him too much. Makes him too much a part of her life, her work. They ask her things like: "What kind of work would *you* be doing if you didn't have a son?" J. M. totally ignorant of the fact that they might as well be asking her to think about the kind of work she would be doing if she lived on Mars. Both questions are asking her to envision a life outside of her reality, outside of the realm of possibility. Even worse, both questions assume that she would *want* a certain kind of reality, that she would want a life on Mars or a life without her son.

Today I had a terrible day at work. There is needless conflict over my office space, which has prevented me from using it for nearly the last six weeks. My work has suffered. I am behind. It is April, the end of the semester is approaching, the deadlines loom.

I pick you up from school and the first thing you say is, "Mom, what are we having for dinner?"

"I don't know," I reply blankly, already dreading the prospect of figuring out something to make, then having to go to the grocery store to get stuff to make it since the pantry is empty due to our present time constraints, and then having to take more time to actually prepare it, and then, finally, having to spend the time cleaning up afterwards.

As if you can read my mind you say, "Mom, I'm gonna take you out to dinner tonight."

"What?" I ask, wondering how you can possibly do that; you are twelve.

"Yep, I'm gonna take you out to dinner. But I only have twenty bucks so keep that in mind."

In the car, on the way home from dinner, I thank you.

You say, "Plan on it happening more in the future."

I ask, "Why?"

You say, "I'm going to be older—and you are too but don't think about that—so I'll be able to buy your dinner more often. Get used to it."

At that point I have to turn away from you for a moment because it feels like I'm going to cry. At that moment I realize that you are going to take care of me someday when I need you to. That you already do that now.

Woman.
Thirty-one.
Single.
Alone.
Lonely.
Alone, content.
Alone, confused.

The single, thirty-one-year-old woman who mothers a 13-year-old child alone puts down the hairdryer and stares again at her reflection. The stretch marks. She wonders if anyone will accept them, accept her. She wonders if she'll ever have the chance to see them stretch again.

It occurs to her that if something about her life doesn't change soon, she will miss the chance of having more children. She realizes that the way she lives right now seriously decreases her chances of meeting someone and forming a meaningful long-term relationship.

She doesn't have time.

Holman
Jones

And though she knows it is possible, she would never choose to do this again, alone. These thoughts cause a dull yet pronounced pain in her chest as if she's lost someone. *Can your heart ache over loves you've never known?*²²

She's running out of time.

She struggles, sleeps not enough, can't pay all the bills, or buy new shoes for her son, nor can she figure out what she wants to be when she grows up:

A scholar?
A mother?
An artist?
A partner?
A lover?
A writer?

Plath

She struggles to imagine the way to being all these things, wants to be too many things. Wants to need nothing! Wants to need no one! Though she's uncertain about whether this means that she wants to be alone.

Because she also wants to love, to connect, to collaborate, to relate. Because she wants to feel her heart race and her palms sweat and her stomach flutter

when that someone special walks in the room. Because she wants her heart to be full.

She wonders how you can tell whether you want something because it's truly what you want or because it's what you've been told to want. If she is to be alone, she wants it to be out of choice, not out of circumstance. And right now it's very hard to know the difference.

The difference between control and fate.

The difference between love and dependency.

Barthes The difference between wants and needs.

The difference between what is unknown and what is (im)possible.

Cobb The difference between alone and lonely.¹³

She puts the hairdryer away and reaches behind her for her robe. Her son is away today, having spent the night on an overnight field trip. This is the first time in months that she didn't have to wake up early to get him to school.¹⁴ And, though she misses him, she enjoyed sleeping in, she enjoyed her long shower, and she is looking forward to the rest of her day in solitude. She has no plans to see friends or surround herself with people. Instead, she will stay home. She will read and write. She will play her guitar and sing. She is excited about being alone.

Rich

Even if it means she will feel a bit lonely.¹⁵

EPILOGUE

I have lived as a single mother, alone with my son, for almost the entire seventeen years of his life, nearly half of my life. I have tried, often unsuccessfully, to explain to others how this experience has produced some of the most connected and most alienated moments of my life. My relationship with my son is one of the closest connections and deepest loves I have known, yet, this relationship—or rather the material realities that result from our situation as single mom and child—often precludes my engagement in other kinds of relationships, and often precludes my ability to relate with my son. As a single mother, I find myself in weird paradoxes, at once longing to be alone and longing not to be lonely. Writing this was an attempt to show you, my reader, what that feels like.¹⁶

This essay is also about (not) being alone. The stories I have shared here are my own, but the experience of being a mother, a single mother, in contemporary Western culture is not my reality alone. Thus, I write sometimes in the third person to create a space to imagine the ways in which this experience and some of the feelings surrounding it might belong to other women as well.¹⁷

This piece is about (not) being alone in yet another way; it is about connecting. Alphonso Lingis reminds me that “with words we connect with the words of others and with their lives.”¹⁸ So I write to ensure that I am not alone, to create connections and uncover the ties already there. I reach, stretch, *lean*¹⁹ toward these connections; I remind myself that even as we write alone, we are writing with, to, and toward others, connecting our words and ideas. In this way, here I write as Roland Barthes does, to an absent other, thus making the absent present. I write *with* Barthes, and I also write *to* you.²⁰

I write to you. I use second-person to invoke you, my reader, as other.²¹ You, like the other of my written words and the other of my life are a present absence.²² You are also wanted, desired, and needed. This might seem like a one-way relationship. You can feel with my story and come to know me through these experiences, but what do I know of you? I suppose I do not know you. Though, if any part of this story resonates with you, then perhaps I do. Perhaps it is possible for me to be alone, together, with you. ■

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NOTES

1. Della Pollock asks, “What if writing buried the sensuous reality of its object in the folds of an emerging subject? Could their twin becomings comprise a less alienated practice of performative knowing?” (“The Performative ‘I,’” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 7, no. 3 [2007]: 250). I ask the same questions with regard to this essay as I consider how the idea for this piece becomes a movement from a story about single motherhood, solitude, and (a)lone(li)ness to a story about writing and thinking with others, to a story about connecting.

2. Pollock describes performative writing as “making no sense or meaning per se, but making writing perform.” In Pollock's words, “writing as *doing* displaces writing as meaning.” (Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane [New York: New York University Press, 1998], 75 original emphasis). Similarly, Ronald J. Pelias argues that “performative writing rests on the belief that the world is not given, but constructed” (“Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical*

Methodologies 5, no. 4 [2005]: 418). So here, I am asking you to think about what this text is doing. What does it make possible?

3. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 16–17. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes uses marginal references to credit the thinkers, friends, and writers who have influenced his thoughts. Thus, my use of references in the left margin is a stylistic homage to Barthes—a connection of form. I think through this story and experiences with Barthes and many others, trying to make sense of my experiences and searching to find resonance in the writing and ideas of others. Like Barthes, “[t]he references supplied in this fashion are not authoritative but amical: I am not invoking guarantees, merely recalling, by a kind of salute given in passing, what has seduced, convinced, or what has momentarily given the delight of understanding (of being understood?)” (Ibid., 9).

4. Barthes reminds me that “absence is the figure of privation; simultaneously, I desire and I need. Desire is squashed against need. That is the obsessive phenomenon of all amorous sentiment,” and I recall that I have felt such privation even while present in a romantic relationship (Ibid., 16).

5. You will also notice that there are entire pages in this document with no names in the margin. That is because I was/am often alone.

6. Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

7. Ronald J. Pelias, “On the Joy of Connections,” *Qualitative Communication Research* 1, no. 2 (2012): 164. “Connection begins in enchantment, a curious wondering that calls for a step closer. It pulls me forward like the wizard’s chanted spell, the magician’s empty palm, the conjurer’s white smoke. Its allure is the possible.” And the allure of the possible, of what is possible, cannot possibly ever be as strong as it is when you look a newborn in the eyes.

8. “Absence persists—I must endure it.” Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 16.

9. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*; Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (New York: Penguin, 2003); Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

10. Vivian Gornick writes about the difficulty of maintaining romantic relationships with men because of the ways her feminist politics and ideals often seemed at odds with her relational possibilities. She explains: “Independence, I thought, was what I valued above all else. But it was turning out that I had not understood the meaning of the word at all” (“The Pain of Solitude: The Pleasure of Self-Knowledge,” in *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth about Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage*, ed. Ellen Gilchrist and Cathi Hanauer [New York: William Morrow, 2002], 261). I read with her and I think of the countless times I prided myself on being independent, autonomous, or self-reliant. I wonder if, in truth, “I was alone not because of my politics, but because I did not know how to live in a decent way with another human being” (259).

11. Michael Cobb thinks that being single should actually be considered another kind of “nonmajority” sexuality (“Lonely,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 [2007]: 446). A counter-sexuality, if you will, that “[interrupts] the steely, enduring logic of the couple” (449); I certainly feel as though I am evaluated from within the framework of this couple ideology. Indeed, I want to join forces with Cobb in his endeavor, and I hope my desire to partner with him does not contradict his critique of compulsory coupledness.

12. I read Stacy Holman Jones’s words: “She is someone’s daughter, once in birth and once in adoption, but she is not your child. You are not her mother. Still you say the words and you wonder if she hears. You whisper in the moonlight the spiraling thoughts of another sleepless night” (“Lost and Found,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 31, no. 4 [2011]: 333.) And I think to myself that the answer is yes. Yes, our hearts can ache for loves we have not known. And I also think, my heart alone does not ache; thus, my heart does not ache alone.

13. In “Lonely,” Cobb is also interested in defining singleness as a way of being that is neither lonely nor desperate—I am on board with this aim; although, as evidenced in this essay, I am unsure of whether I have figured out how to do that in my personal life.

14. I am reminded of Adrienne C. Rich, who explains, “my needs always balanced against those of a child, and always losing. I could love so much better, I told myself, after even a quarter-hour of selfishness, of peace, of detachment from my children” (*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* [New York: Norton, 1976], 23). Nearly 40 years later, and it seems as though some aspects of the experience of motherhood have not changed all that much.

15. On being alone, Gornick states: “I am, simply, a person living a life partly that I chose and partly that chose me, a life that, though filled with friends and family and colleagues, is primarily one of solitude, one lived autonomously. And though this is far from ideal at all times—and though some days loneliness plagues me—for the most part, this is a life, my life” (“The Pain of Solitude,” 26). As I read her words I find that I recognize the life she describes; it is my life, too.

16. Many communication scholars have written on the virtues of sharing personal narratives in academic texts. More specifically, they have discussed the political importance of sharing stories from the margin. See Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 763–91; Kristin M. Langellier, “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know for Sure,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1999): 125–44; D. Soyini Madsion, “Performing Theory/Embodied Writing,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1999): 107–24.

17. Mary Kelly writes about the choices she made about representing her story of motherhood in *Post Partum-Document*: “Although the mother’s story is my story, *Post-Partum Document* is not an autobiography It suggests an interplay of voices—the mother’s experience, feminist analysis, academic discussion, political debate” (*Post-Partum Document* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], xxii). The connections I seek to make in this piece are both of an interpersonal and intertextual nature: I share my story in attempt to connect to my reader personally, but I am also

reaching across, thinking with, and making connections among different discourses—both popular and academic. Beyond the interplay of voices, Kelly actually writes in different voices for effect throughout different sections of the document. She explains that “in the ‘Documentation’ and ‘Experimentum Mentis’ sections, the mode of address shifts to the third person. Here the Mother (she) is no longer accessible, so replete (not someone who is like you, like you once were or would like to be). For the reader this implies a moment of separation (for some, perhaps an uncomfortable confrontation with the Father) or at least a ‘breathing space’ in the text” (Ibid.). Likewise, I offer an interplay of voices and also use the third person to create a kind of separation; though for me perhaps the separation offers a personal moment of comfort, a chance to be outside of my experience of mothering for a few moments instead of smack in the middle of a reality that is sometimes completely overwhelming.

18. Alphonso Lingis, *The First Person Singular* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 63.

19. Pelias states, “in most cases, leaning toward others carries the greatest potential for meaningful and lasting relationships” (Ronald J. Pelias, *Leaning: A Poetics of Personal Relations* [Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011], 9). I agree, as this has been my experience in life in so many contexts, whether it was leaning toward my newborn child the first time I held him in my arms so I could breathe him in more closely, or unconsciously leaning toward a friend in the middle of intense or joyous conversation. I have also leaned in to a good book or an article—physically—when a particular idea struck me or a feeling resonated strongly. I believe I have developed “meaningful and lasting relationships” with my favorite authors and scholars—with other writers and thinkers. Pelias goes on to say, “Leaning toward, leaning in, calls for a negotiation of bodies. I find myself always asking how my body stands in relationship to another’s” (Ibid.). Indeed, I find myself asking this as I type these words: how do *our bodies* stand in relationship to one another? I imagine you, my reader, somewhere out there in a future time and space, reading this. I am leaning toward you now as I type these words, physically moving closer to my keyboard and screen, mentally moving closer to my imagined vision of you. By the time you read this, where will I be? How will you imagine me? Does your body lean toward this text or some imagined version of me, a writer/scholar/single mother/human being? In the physical absence of the other, how do we do the *leaning*?

20. Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*.

21. I move through first-, second-, and third-person points of view throughout this piece for several reasons, some of which are difficult to account for or explain. This is because these choices were artistic, part of the performance of this text, and not every aspect of the communication, doing, or performance of an aesthetic text can be found in its words. Nevertheless, at the most basic level, different points of view produce different perspectives. Thus, I play with perspective intentionally as the creator/speaker of this text to see how it shifts my relationship to the story and the way I understand it. I hope the shifting points of view might also offer my reader/audience some different perspectives on these experiences. I employ multiple points of view to see how doing so might shift my relationship with/to the reader. I use first-person to personalize

particular moments. I use second-person to address you—my reader—directly, and at other times to let you peer into intimate conversations I imagine having with my son. I use third-person because it allows me to stand outside my life, my story, for a moment—to witness the experience of being a young single mother instead of living it. It gives me a break from that reality while also permitting me to talk about extremely vulnerable moments and emotions without feeling so attached to them. While audiencing these moments, I do not stand alone as a single mother; rather, I stand together with other potential members of the audience and somehow that position feels less lonely. Even though this is *my story* of single-mothering, the experience of becoming a single mother as a teenager is one shared by many women in US culture. Thus, I hope the third-person perspective helps my audience imagine how some of the feelings and experiences I relate could be shared with other young mothers who are not me.

22. “Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved’s absence; actually a preposterous situation; the other is absent as referent, present as allocutory. This singular distortion generates a kind of insupportable present; I am wedged between two tenses, that of the reference and that of the allocution: you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you)” (Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 15). And so you, dear reader, are here, too.