

## Experiments in Voice and Visibility

---

### Creating Space for Graduate Student (Single) Mothers in the Mother-Free Space of the Academy

*In my doctoral department, the invisibility of my situation as a single mother and the way it was so often at odds with academic culture left me feeling alienated from my peers and my community. In an effort to balance school and single motherhood, to make visible the reality of my situation, and to connect more deeply with my academic community, I begin a series of research experiments in voice and visibility. These projects often involved my son, as he was an inextricable part of my situation as a mother. Moreover, his life and our relationship were undoubtedly impacted by “my situation” as a graduate student. In this essay, I discuss a few experiments in voice and visibility that were instrumental to getting through my doctoral program. These projects involved risk, creative strategies, and lots and lots of support from other members of my community. I hope sharing these stories might inspire other graduate student mothers to push through even when it feels impossible. Likewise, I hope faculty members and graduate students will be inspired to support and empower the mothers in their respective departments.*

When my eleven-year-old son, Benjamin, and I relocated across the country so that I could pursue a doctoral degree in communication, I knew that it was going to be difficult. I had just completed my master’s degree while single parenting, so I felt that I knew what was in store for me logistically: lots of sleepless nights, tricky scheduling, childcare negotiations, and life on a shoe-string budget. It would be tough, but I was convinced that I could do it. I was fully funded as a doctoral fellow, Benjamin was on the waitlist for an excellent school, and my department seemed very supportive. But by the end of my first semester, I was convinced that I’d made a huge mistake. My funding was not enough to cover all of our expenses, and I would have to adjunct extra classes

so that we could make it—this would mean less time with Ben and more strain on our schedule. I'd had to forfeit participation in major conferences because I was unable to arrange childcare while I travelled and/or was unable to afford to take my son with me; and, meanwhile, Benjamin's academic performance plummeted as he struggled with homesickness for the family we'd left behind.

As for my department, although it was widely known that I was a single mother, I got the impression that most people did not really understand what that meant; they could not really *see* what that meant. The complexities and nuances of the actual relationship and the socio-economic and temporal implications of that position were not visible to them. There was a disconnect when I tried to explain to my colleagues, the majority of whom were not parents, what it meant to move through graduate school as a single mother. In her book *The Mask of Motherhood*, maternal scholar Susan Maushart explains that “the realities of parenthood and especially motherhood are kept carefully shrouded in silence, disinformation, and outright lies” (5). According to Maushart, the silence that surrounds the day-to-day realities of motherhood creates a divide between parents and non-parents. I felt that divide, but there was something more....

It was as though there had been a willingness to accept my single mother status at a superficial level, maybe even commend me for my efforts, but there was the expectation that certain matters should simply remain private, i.e., invisible, and that I should spare others from thinking about what the doing and living of life might actually be like for me and for Ben. Benjamin was with me on campus frequently because childcare was not readily available in the evenings when I attended graduate seminars. He spent many hours alone, hidden away in my office where my peers and professors did not see him, nor could they possibly see that while I sat with them in class, was physically present, I was mentally focused elsewhere—constantly worrying about what this child was doing alone in my office. Was he finishing his homework? Was he eating the dinner that I'd supplied for him? Was he bored out of his mind? Lonely? Safe? Scared?

Research indicates that my experience is not uncommon. Huff, Hampson, and Tagliarina argue that academic departments foster cultures that encourage a public-private split; consequently, they show that the student mothers in their study were often worried about how their departments would react if their motherhood “became too public” (446). In a 2008 case study, Lynch found that other student mothers often feel pressure to enact what they refer to as a “strategy of ‘maternal invisibility’” in order to “appear to be ‘just students,’ preserving a cultural form in which a graduate student is 100% committed to their work” (596). Benjamin and I were not separated from this community merely by the shroud of silence that surrounds motherhood as a whole but by the cloak of invisibility that maintains the academy as a mother-free space:

a culture that “demands freedom *from* mothers”; a place where “women who are primary caregivers to children are omitted, excluded, limited and/or constrained as a presence” via various formal and informal processes that typically involve silencing, making invisible, or otherwise penalizing women who are mothers (Cunningham, *Love* 182, emphasis original). The absence, silence, and invisibility of mothers in the academy has ethical as well as epistemological implications, as Huff, Hampson, and Tagliarina point out:

the experiences of mothers are fundamentally important to the mission of academia. Academia plays an important role in knowledge production and influences larger understanding of the world and individual’s lives. If the class of knowledge producers is limited to those who are not parents, the knowledge produced may not take into account the full nature of relationships in the world. (457-58)

In my department, the invisibility of our particular life situation and the way my single motherhood was so often at odds with academic culture left me feeling alienated from my peers and my community. Professionally and personally, I longed to feel a connection with my peers, and I thought that this would not be possible unless they really saw us and our circumstances and understood them. Politically, I could see from my standpoint the inequity inherent in the academic system and wanted to devote my scholarship to changing those circumstances for myself and other mothers. Pragmatically, I needed a way to integrate my graduate work with my daily life to find a way to attend to all of my responsibilities. The culmination of these desires inspired me to begin a series of research experiments in voice and visibility. These projects often involved my son as he was an inextricable part of my situation as a mother. Moreover, his life and our relationship were undoubtedly impacted by “my situation” as a graduate student. Thus I strongly believed his circumstances merited visibility and voice as well.

## Experiments in Voice and Visibility

### *#1 – A Single Mom and her Child Coresearcher*

One of the more impactful forays into voice and visibility was actually a tangential outcome of a different research project that ended up opening the door to future projects, conversation, and community-building within my department. I was taking a qualitative research methods class during the second semester of my doctoral program. As a semester project, I decided to design and pilot a qualitative interviewing study that would focus on the relational and everyday experiences of graduate student single mothers and their children.

I hoped it might become my dissertation. The unusual aspect of this project was that I invited Benjamin to be my coresearcher. I was worried that I might have problems getting my professor to sign off on the project and even more worried about getting it through our institutional review board (IRB), but to my surprise and delight the study was approved on both counts. The research aims and overview were as follows:

*Objective.* To gain insight into the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers and their children; to provide my son, Benjamin, a formal opportunity to engage in a collaborative project as my coresearcher; and to discover the limits and possibilities inherent in both of these life experiences.

*Research Questions:*

- How does the experience of single mothering while completing an advanced degree impact the mother-child relationship?
- How does the experience of single mothering while completing an advanced degree impact one's scholarship and academic responsibilities?
- How do children perceive their mothers' academic pursuits?
- What types of challenges (economic, relational, time-management etc.) do single graduate student moms and children face and how do they negotiate them?
- What are the costs and benefits of this experience?

I asked Benjamin to be my coresearcher for several reasons. First, as I mentioned above, whether visible or not, Benjamin, was almost always present while I was conducting and writing my research. Given the fact that this project was in so many ways about his life, it seemed remiss not to formally acknowledge his presence and seemed natural to invite his participation. My pursuit of a graduate degree had consequences for him, although at the time he was not often given a forum to voice those experiences, particularly in academic settings. I wanted to create a space for that. Finally, graduate school and (single) motherhood are most often mutually exclusive endeavors; this mutual exclusivity is part of the problem. I was attempting, with this project, to bring the two endeavours closer together. Whether or not it is a good decision to merge these two aspects of life is still up for debate, but the practical reasons for needing to do so outweighed the luxury of deciding whether or not I wanted my family life to become enmeshed in my research and vice versa.

Benjamin and I worked on this project together over the course of the semester: developing interview guides, conducting interviews, video blogging, and more. Each week, I would go to my methods class to discuss the course

readings from that week, and then the second half of the class was typically designated for class members to share the progress of our projects. Every week when the time came for the research-sharing portion of the class, I would ask my professor if Benjamin could join our discussion since he was my coresearcher, and each time the professor agreed. At first, it felt awkward to me; I was very aware of the presence of a child, my child, and I could only imagine what the other students must have been thinking. In actuality, at least outwardly, everyone was supportive and welcoming. By the end of the semester, Ben was practically a regular part of the class.

One evening near the end of the term while on our way home after class Benjamin and I began discussing the way we would represent the findings from our study in the end-of-semester project presentation. Benjamin was horrified at the idea that we would have to write a paper about our study and stressed out about the prospect of trying to deliver a conventional academic presentation in front of a bunch of grownups. I told him that we didn't have to present our research in a traditional format. If he had other ideas, I was open to them, and I felt that my instructor would also be flexible. He sat in silence the rest of the way home. Then, shortly after walking through the door he began improvising a monologue about how to be a graduate student. It was satirical, witty, and poignant. It was *his* voice. He told me more about his perceptions and feelings in that instance than he ever did in any of our meetings, interviews, or video blogs. He eventually developed his improvisation into a performance and delivered it to undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty members at an annual departmental communication event. I soon realized that the things that were happening around and outside of the formal research project were as interesting and important as the project itself in terms of creating visibility and conversation around issues of academic motherhood. As part of our project presentation, in addition to our original research questions, we asked the class and professor to consider the following questions:

- How does single mothering while completing an advanced degree impact the university?
- How does it impact the graduate and academic community? How might it?
- How can admitting single mothers and children into an academic community or into a graduate program enhance the scholarly experiences of that community?
- How do administrators, colleagues, faculty, and staff respond to us?
- What do we bring?
- How can we become part of the community and how can our presence here effect change?

Undertaking this project in a classroom setting provided the opportunity for others to interact with us while learning about what our life was like, and Benjamin and I suddenly became more visible to our community. The conversations that resulted from our presence in this class shed light on the relational aspects of mothering, provided an opening for conversations about the constraints faced by graduate student mothers and problematic structural practices of the academy, and ultimately created a small space for this graduate student mother and her child in the mother-free space of the academy. Moreover, as a result of Benjamin's public performance "How to Be a Graduate Student" he was invited by another professor in our department to participate in a performance art class that led to our next collaborative experiment in voice and visibility.

### *#2 – Open House Performance*

The semester immediately following the qualitative methods class, in which Benjamin and I conducted our exploratory single-moms-and-children project, I enrolled in a performance art class with Benjamin. This was a graduate level class offered in the Department of Communication at my university. I say that I enrolled in the class with him because he was actually invited and scheduled to participate in the class long before my formal enrollment. In reality, I enrolled because I wanted to do more collaborative research projects with my son, and this class was a means for us to explore alternate modes and methods of inquiry together.

Inspired by some of the reading and performances on "the everyday" that we'd studied in our class, I had an idea for a performance that would focus on my and Benjamin's everyday life. On the day of our in class performance, Benjamin and I displayed a slideshow of our home that contained pictures of the inside and outside of our house that he had taken the week prior. Some images showed us going about our everyday home activities. Some of the pictures showed our clutter and our mess. At the end of our slideshow presentation, we divided our performance art class into four small groups and gave each an envelope containing an invitation to our "open house" and a key to our home. Class members were instructed that our house would be open for one full week and they were free to drop by anytime, with or without calling ahead. An excerpt from the artist statement provides a bit more insight into the performance:

This performance is about the everyday, the mundane and the not so mundane, creation, chance, invitation, reversal, participation, collaboration, home, public/private, community, borders/boundaries, space, risk, vulnerability, interruption, and life. Our life. And maybe yours, also.

For Benjamin, this is an opportunity for our peers to see into our everyday, to see what our life is like right now, and maybe that will give them a better idea as to who we are as human beings in our society.

For Summer, this is also an opportunity to extend her current interests with regard to the intersection of (single)motherhood and academia. Although much of her (and Ben's) everyday lived experiences happen at USF, there is much in life that doesn't happen there. A large portion of our lives are lived in our homes (Cunningham, "Open House").

A major motivation behind this project was the idea that while seeing us at school made our life visible to our community in certain ways, lives aren't lived solely inside the walls of the university. If we wanted people to have a better understanding of what our life was like, we would need them to see other parts. As you can see from the artist's statement, however, the thrust was not only about making the private public or making the unseen visible, it was about trying to connect to our community.

Over the course of the week, some class members came and others didn't. Some people announced their visits, and others didn't. A favourite moment for both of us was when we arrived home one day after school and running errands. After the initial shock of walking through the door to find a group of people in our home painting the wall bright blue, we were delighted that David from our class along with his partner and our professor along with her partner and daughter all came to our event and were working hard to make our house beautiful. After the painting was finished, our professor and her family brought over their dinner to share with us. The surprise of finding these guests painting our walls on a rainy day brightened and warmed our home, both literally and figuratively. Both acts—the painting of the wall and the sharing of the meal—made us feel cared for and connected to our academic community. From that day, each time we walked into our house the first thing we would see was our beautiful blue wall; it became a constant reminder of our friends, membership to, and connection with this community. When we eventually moved from that home, we had a sample of the blue paint colour matched at the hardware store. We painted the kitchen of our new home the same colour—the colour that feels like connection and home to us and the colour that reminds us of one of our first experiences of being accepted and seen within this particular community.

In the end, about half of the members of our class attended our open house. Several of the class members who did not attend offered apologies and excuses for not coming. Many said they were too busy. Some people expressed regret at

not being able to come, and their remorse seemed sincere as though they had really wanted to attend. Others who made excuses about not attending seemed to be offering them for reasons connected to obligation and guilt. It was as if by creating this open house as a performance within the frame of an academic class, we created a sense of obligation for people to attend that they might not have felt had we simply held an open house as a social event. People, whether they truly wanted to visit with us or not, felt as if there had been an expectation for them to do so. This sense of obligation reminded me of the way I had felt so often with regard to academic events. So many times there were academic events that I had wanted, and arguably needed, to participate in, but could not due to my home/family situation. In this sense, our performance effected a reversal in a way that I had not anticipated. This reversal became a point of conversation when we debriefed the performance the following week in class. The performance itself became a significant building block to creating a real space for Benjamin and me within my academic community.

### *#3 – “Mom’s School” by Ben: An Email Exchange*

Not all of my experiments in voice and visibility were formal research or performance projects. Some of them were simply little moments, impromptu conversations. Although these conversations about motherhood and academe were often in response to formal projects, others were reactions to informal kinds of activism and resistance such as the day-to-day decisions I made within my department to make my (single) motherhood visible, which often meant making my son, Benjamin, visible as well. In what follows, I share a conversation that highlights how making motherhood visible can open opportunities for difficult conversations that actually resulted in raising consciousness. These conversations cannot happen when mothers are silenced and motherhood is made invisible.

“Mom’s School” was a serial comic strip that Benjamin created and distributed during the time we were taking the performance art class together. It was mainly a commentary on my neglectful behaviour, which resulted from my preoccupation with graduate school duties, and also a commentary on the consuming demands of academe from the perspective of a child. The strip was funny, critical, and sometimes hard for me to read because it highlighted the loneliness and alienation that Benjamin experienced in his daily life as an only child of a single graduate student mother. Each week he would create a new strip and go to the copy machine in the Department of Communication to make duplicates that he would then distribute to faculty and graduate student mailboxes. I also hung the originals outside of my office door. Benjamin’s comic definitely caught people’s attention, although not everyone was a fan, as evidenced in the following email exchange:

Summer,

Thanks for the email. I just wanted to chat with you about ben's comic book. I think it's great he's putting one together, and I like seeing them [sic] outside your office on display. Could I just respectfully ask that he not put a photocopy in my mailbox? Like i [sic] said, I think it's a great idea and a great way for him to work on navigating between kid-life and university, but I don't have a lot of use for them outside their momentary enjoyment. They tend to find their way to the recycle bin instead of being kept for posterity. I don't want to be a jerk about it, but I'd be grateful to save the extra tree and see them posted outside of your office.

Thanks for understanding.

[Name Omitted]

The sender was a colleague of mine whom I knew Benjamin considered a personal friend, and he would have been crushed had he heard these comments from her directly. I imagine she knew this to be the case, which is why she probably decided to ask me to handle the situation in a way that would disguise the true origin of the request. I was frustrated by the situation and I could not respond right away. I did not feel it was fair of her to ask me to intervene with Benjamin in this matter and felt that if she would have had to address him face to face, she might have reconsidered what it was she was really asking him to do and what she was asking me to do. After spending some time thinking through the implications of her request, I responded with the following email:

Hi [Name Omitted],

I appreciate you coming to me with this concern, and I also appreciate your thoughtful consideration of Ben's comic and the motivations behind it. I spent a good part of last night and this morning giving your communication the same considerate reflection while simultaneously considering what it would mean to ask Benjamin to stop distributing his comics. I've decided I'm not going to ask him to do so, and I'll tell you why. Let me start by saying that, though I realize you are making a personal request, my decision is really not about you personally, [name omitted]. Accordingly, I mean no disrespect to you, personally, in my refusal. Ultimately, my decision is rooted in ethical and political reasons. Benjamin does spend a great deal of his time on campus negotiating his position in this space where he often feels out of place and, at times, unwelcome. Regardless, he has no choice in the matter. He is here whether he wants to be or not, and

most often has little voice or room for expression in the very world that makes up such a large part of his present life. I think he has found some agency in this comic, not just in the making of it, but in the way he has chosen to display and distribute it. He considers it a communicative performance, and he is systematic about the way he distributes it. It announces his presence in his own voice to people who see him, to people who don't, and to people who don't want to. I don't believe this kind of communicative, agentic act should be regulated, stifled, or silenced. In fact, I think to do so would be unethical. Given these reasons, I cannot and will not ask him to stop putting them in people's boxes.

However, there is certainly no expectation for you to keep them for posterity. I don't think that's the point. I sincerely hope you didn't/don't feel that obligation, and if you did feel so because you and Ben know each other in a personal, friendly way, please let me alleviate that expectation. What you do with the mail in your box just as what you do with any communication you receive is up to you. How you choose to interpret the communication—whether you choose to ignore, reflect, enjoy, or remain indifferent—that is your right as receiver. If they get recycled or even trashed, that says something, too. And, well, I think that's the risk we all take when trying to be heard, though for some of us the risks are higher and opportunities fewer.

Thanks for your consideration,  
[Name Omitted]

The idea that motherhood and its products (mothers and children) should be contained within the private space of the relationship and within the private sphere of the home is a common expectation upheld within the mother-free space of the academy. We could read this email exchange as an example of an unwelcome spillage of the private sphere into the public sphere, a threat to the mother-free expectations of the academy. We could read my colleague's email to me as an attempt to police this child-free/mother-free zone and assert her right to be free from mothers and children. However, her final response shows that she was open to considering the situation from my perspective, and although this interaction was difficult, it seems as if she herself walked away with a different perspective:

Summer,  
Thanks for getting back to me on this. I fully understand your position and respect your decision. In fact, were I in your place, I can't

say I'd make a different decision. You want to do what's best for Ben and help him feel empowered in a space where he's out of place. I'll continue to get a chuckle out of them when they find their way in my mailbox and then add them to the recycle pile. No harm, no foul. Thanks again,  
[Name Omitted]

My goal in all of these experiments in voice and visibility was to make our life as single mom and child more visible to those around me so that people would not look at me or other mothers and think “oh, she’s a graduate student and a single mom” without knowing and without seeing what that really means. Motherhood is a relational form of personhood, and single motherhood in particular does not often provide for the kind of autonomy that people without children so often take for granted. I wanted people to see and to know Benjamin and to begin to understand what this experience means to him. My goal was also for Benjamin to see academe and school in a new way, to understand the opportunities here, and to understand why this part of my life is also so important. And, my ultimate goal was, and is still, to make graduate education more accessible for non-traditional students, particularly women like me.

## Conclusion

All the experiments herein have their limits in terms of voice and visibility. Alone, they could not foster the kind of change needed in the academy to move it from a mother-free to a mother-friendly space. However, at my doctoral institution, these experiments succeeded in raising consciousness and provoking conversations among faculty and other members of the academy community who might not have otherwise even participated in such discussions. I also believe many of these experiments paved the way for my son and me to be truly seen and welcomed in our community; they facilitated our membership and belonging.

During my time as a graduate student single mother, I had lots of conversations in lots of different ways aimed at making the academy a mother-friendly space. I published and presented scholarly essays and worked with the administration at my doctoral institution to support programs for graduate student mothers. I had difficult one-on-one conversations with people I know and with strangers. I have talked to people from my head and my heart, but that is not all.

As a single mom, I have also shown up to places where I wasn't supposed to with a kid. I performed my motherhood, my single motherhood, openly, strategically, thoughtfully, and sometimes desperately. Sometimes I did this to make a point; sometimes because I simply had no choice. But I wasn't performing alone. Just as I supported and empowered my son, in the examples

of voice and visibility, to have presence in the academic contexts where he was expected to remain silent and invisible, others supported and empowered me to be visible as a mother in my academic community and other academic environments where maternity was expected to remain invisible. For example, professors sometimes let me show up to class with my kid or leave their class early to get him from school. And the support went beyond helping me to be a mother; my department helped me to be a successful graduate student. Colleagues sometimes went to get Ben from school so I could be somewhere else. Other people performed caregiving with me, or for me, and Benjamin, in ways that allowed me to perform my identity as something other than mother (if only for a moment). I think my visibility as a single mother, so often with Ben in tow, served a part in making some transformative moments. However, I also think it's important to make visible the kinds of work that others did to make our academic community a more mother-friendly place; creating opportunities for graduate student mothers in the academy and dismantling the mother-free space will require the effort and participation of many, not just of mothers. In my situation, relational acts and support from my community are what made the impossible possible. Last December, I graduated with my PhD, not just because of my efforts but because of the support of an academic community that empowered me to do so.

Ensuring that graduate student mothers are able to successfully complete their programs is an important aspect to creating a diverse academy. Literature on academic motherhood emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the circumstances of graduate students in particular because “doctoral student years typically fall during prime family formation and childbearing years” (Mason, Goulden, and Frasch); however, since graduate students are not faculty, they often do not have access to the same kinds of formal institutional and policy supports such as maternity leave and access to healthcare, which adds to the precarity of their situation (Springer, Parker, and Leviten-Reid; Lynch). For this reason, recommendations for change often emphasize the need for institutions and departments to formalize policies such as paid parental leave for graduate students (Goulden, Mason, and Frasch) and to create structural support such as on-site childcare (Lynch).

Nevertheless, other scholarship argues that policy alone is not enough; Spring, Parker, and Leviten-Reid as well as Huff, Hampson, and Tagliarina show that when institutions had policies and/or supports in place for graduate students, department faculty, and students themselves were unaware of them or were afraid to use them because they were part of organizational and departmental cultures that penalized or otherwise stigmatized academic motherhood. Wyatt-Nichol, Cardona, and Drake assert in a recent essay on work-life balance for academic mothers, “policies designed to eliminate or minimize structural

inequality will only be effective through supportive organizational cultures” (109). The experiments in voice and visibility that I’ve shared herein were attempts to engender conversations that might facilitate such cultural change within academic departments.

Creating mother-friendly academic cultures is a key component to supporting and empowering academic mothers, particularly graduate student mothers. While a focus on policy is an important component to developing that culture, it is not the only component of a supportive academic culture. Even if, and where, such formal support is available, graduate students mothers, particularly single mothers, will need more than formal kinds of support if they are to feel empowered to complete their programs; they will need to feel included and welcome as mothers in their academic communities; they are also likely to need pragmatic and political support from faculty and their peers. These kinds of support are contingent on the participation of other members of the academic community; garnering such support will require conversation and consciousness raising so that members of the academic community who are not mothers will understand how they are stakeholders in this issue. Such conversations do not, will not, and cannot happen as long as issues of maternity are made silent and invisible. Changing academic culture from a mother-free space to a mother-friendly space in the long-term and creating the necessary supports for graduate student mothers in the interim will require effort, risk, creativity, and participation from a larger contingent of the academic community. So how do we do it? I leave you with the answers that Benjamin and I gave to the research questions from our collaborative interviewing project:

The answers to these questions aren’t found in a percentage of statistical significance nor are they grounded in the data of a transcript. We are here. We want you to see and feel our presence fully. Our doing, our being, our becoming cannot be reduced to the ink on the page of a family-friendly policy; we cannot be bound up in the pages of a scholarly journal article. This project is more than what is to be found in data, and the answers to our research questions are only to be found in what we all create.

## Coda

On the first day of the fall semester, just a couple of weeks ago, a student from my *Women and Communication* course approached me after class. She explained that she was the single mother of a first grader with special needs. She told me that she did not plan to miss any class, but realistically knew it was likely that she would probably need to leave early or be absent at some point to attend

meetings or appointments connected to her son. “No problem,” I told her, “I appreciate that you are letting me know up front. Just keep the lines of communication open and we’ll be fine.” She thanked me for being so understanding. I explained that I’d been through my undergraduate and graduate programs as a single mom and that I understood. She smiled and left.

The following week she stayed after again. She said, “I’m finally putting it together.”

“What?” I asked, assuming she meant she was making connections between the Beauvoir essay from last week and the Lorde and hooks readings that we were discussing this week.

“You are the instructor I heard about,” she explained, “the one who shows up with her kid, whose research is about motherhood and higher education. I was taking another communication class several semesters ago and a student told me about you. They suggested I take a class with you. I didn’t realize I was in *your* women and com. class this semester. That explains why you were so understanding about my son.”

She went on, “I am so excited to be in your class. Do you know I am in the process of applying to graduate school right now? Being in your class, knowing you, makes me feel like I can do it.”

One year after completing my PhD, I am currently a visiting instructor in the same department where I conducted my experiments in voice and visibility. My son is a senior in high school. He rarely accompanies me to campus or departmental events anymore mainly because he doesn’t have to and he is interested in other things. Now instead of department members glancing at me sideways because I brought my kid to an adult space or professional event, professors and graduate students ask, “Where is Ben?” They seem disappointed not to see him. Colleagues email me for professional guidance or advice when they are doing research connected to mothering and motherhood; colleagues also email me or seek out my personal advice about doing work-balance in academe as a mother. I’m not sure that any of this is a sign of the entire culture of a program changing, but there was a shift that felt palpable to me after I began my experiments. At first I feared making my motherhood open, it felt like something I should hide; by the end of my program it was welcome—Ben and I were both welcome. I can also see by the comments from my students and colleagues that these experiments made a mark beyond me: in many ways, my presence—my continued presence—makes the academy a little less mother free.

By and large, academe is still very much a mother-free space. I was fortunate that making my motherhood visible resulted in such a positive response; other student mothers might not have the same experience. That is why now, as a faculty member, it is so important that I continue to advocate for formal policy changes that will make higher education more accessible to (single) mothers,

but also that I do what I can in the interim—because policies and academic cultures don't change over night—to support and encourage the mothers who are in my classes, in my department, and at my institution in the ways that my peers and professors supported me: by recognizing that their circumstances are different, by accommodating their needs whenever possible, and by valuing what they have to contribute. Likewise, I hope that those reading this article will consider the ways they might support and encourage the graduate student mothers in their classes and institutions to successfully navigate their programs so that together we can transform the academy from a *mother-free* to a *mother-friendly* culture.

### Works Cited

- Cunningham, Summer Renee. "Open House." University of South Florida. Tampa, FL. 23-30 September 2010. Performance.
- Cunningham, Summer Renee. "Love and (M)other (Im)Possibilities." Diss. University of South Florida, 2014. Print.
- Goulden, Marc, Mary Ann Mason, and Karie Frasch. "Keeping Women in the Science Pipeline." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 638.1 (2011): 141-62. Print.
- Huff, Jamie, Sarah Coté Hampson, and Corinne M. Tagliarina. "Liberalism's Leaky Legacy: Theory and the Narratives of Graduate Student Mothers." *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context: Challenges, Strategies and Possibilities*. Eds. D. Hallstein, Lynn O'Brien, and Andrea O'Reilly. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2012. 442-60. Print.
- Lynch, Karen Danna. "Gender Roles and the American Academe: A Case Study of Graduate Student Mothers." *Gender and Education* 20.6 (2008): 585-605. Print.
- Mason, Mary Ann, Marc Goulden, and Karie Frasch. "Why Graduate Students Reject the Fast Track." *Academe*, American Association of American Professors. 2009. Web. 23 July 2011.
- Maushart, Susan. *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.
- Springer, Kristen W., Brenda K. Parker, and Catherine Leviten-Reid. "Making Space for Graduate Student Parents: Practice and Politics." *Journal of Family Issues* 30.4 (2009): 435-57. Print.
- Wyatt-Nichol, Heather, Margarita M. Cardona, and Karen Skivers Drake. "Balancing Work and Family in Higher Education: Best Practices and Barriers." *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context: Challenges, Strategies and Possibilities*. Eds. D. Hallstein, D. Lynn O'Brien, and Andrea O'Reilly. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2012. 108-26. Print.