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Authors(s)	Clancy, Annette
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Abstract

This is a personal reflection, as a female academic during Covid-19, on how women's academic productivity seems primarily to be discussed in relation to a different kind of productivity—motherhood. A recent procedure in a maternity hospital, evoked feelings and associations of mothering and being mothered, and how these associations hover over relationships regardless of whether wombs are productive or not. My hope in writing this piece, is that every woman's fear and anxiety may be productively contained (regardless of how she is seen from the outside or momentarily construed from within) during this time of extraordinary turmoil.

Keywords: anxiety, children, COVID-19, grief, motherhood, productivity

¹ aclancy@ucd.ie

I was born in this maternity hospital. On a freezing cold December day in 1962 my mother was wheeled into an operating theatre where I arrived via caesarean at 3.50 in the afternoon. I was a breech birth. At some point in the preceding weeks I decided to turn back. Before words, or thought, or feeling, or breath, my ambivalence about mothering and being mothered sought expression. Perhaps this is where I arrived, right here ... where I am now. Laid out on the overbed table, in front of me from left to right, are: 1 hospital gown, 1 hair net, 1 pair of surgical stockings, 1 pair of disposable underwear wrapped tightly in plastic, 1 urine specimen cup and the largest sanitary pad I have ever seen.

It is 1987 and I am the administrator of a London new writing theatre. My friends (and colleagues) are actors, directors and playwrights. They have agents and accountants ... which seems advisable in this type of business. But they also have therapists to whom they privately tell their stories before working them (or so it seems to me) for public consumption. 'I should get one of those too' I say in jest. And then I do. At 25 years old I walk into her room and when she asks 'so what brings you?' I tell her 'I'm watching a film of my life ... and I'm not in it'. And so, it begins, once a week for two years before the 20+ years that will follow ... with two other therapists in Dublin, and in New York. Initially there are questions about my childhood and my relationship with my parents growing up and I feel the rising shame and embarrassment of ignorance. Perhaps my thespian friends are well versed in the nuance of their parent/child relationships. I find it hard to remember ... no warm embraces, nothing I can pull out of me to meaningfully show how I've emerged fully formed, into this room ... an adult? child? Is it possible to parent yourself if your mother has had to parent your father who, through no fault of his own, takes the place of the child in need of mothering? It seemed logical at the time. He was ill/I became self-sufficient. He was old/I became old before my time. He was depressed/I became defiant. He had dementia/I forgot.

I was supposed to have been a second child, but my brother died, at full term ... a stillbirth. Never spoken about then or now. But the expectation and disappointment lingered of what he, and I, could have/should have been. I'm now an eldest child, an older sister to a younger sister. And so, I cry in frustration at not having the right answers, at not having any answers, at not knowing how to respond, at bewilderment and anger ... until I begin to grieve. I cry snot-filled, red-eyed, ugly tears and emerge from her room with swollen eyes week after

week for two full years. I chew paracetamol tablets to dull the headaches and I hide behind sunglasses as I wind my way across London on the hour-long tube ride home. And each week I come back into her room and pick up where we left off the previous week, piecing together the fragments as Sue (because that was her name) quietly listens, and ‘holds’ me with her gaze ... until one day I say ‘it's time to go back to Dublin’. And so, we begin our parting, and I grieve again. And this time I get to tell her how much I love her and how much her silent holding has helped me to understand what mothering feels like ... I realize bit by bit that grieving something I've never had is so much harder than grieving something I've had and lost.

‘And how are you doing this morning?’ Anne, my nurse, asks as she takes my blood pressure. ‘I'm feeling a bit strange ... I've never been a patient in a maternity hospital’ I say. We exchange glances and Anne tells me that she is 67, ‘A Spinster!’ As our eyes connect, I can see that she is smiling brightly behind her facemask ... ‘I bet you are a fantastic Aunt all the same!’ She tells me that her ‘Aunt rules’ are ‘no religion and no cooking!’ and with that, she rips the Velcro off my arm and heads back to the nursing station.

When my nieces were young (aged 10, 7 and 5) I am summoned to a meeting ... ‘Nettie’ (my nieces' nickname for me) ‘we think it's ok if you get married, but we don't want you to have children’. When I inquire about the reason for this blanket ban on reproduction, I am told it is because they are afraid that I won't have enough time to play with them if I have children of my own. They live in Wales, I live in Ireland, and throughout their childhood I live with the constant fear that they will forget who I am as they are growing up. ‘My’ Aunt rules are, no excessive gifts, just time and attention. I throw my maternal energy into them ... visiting as much as I can, and as they grow, making sure they spend time with me in Ireland. I beam with pride at their accomplishments. As Brexit unfolds, I become a constant nagging voice in their ears about obtaining Irish passports; reminding them that as their mother is Irish, they too are Irish citizens. I fear I'm crossing a line ...

The love I feel for my nieces is uncomplicated by messy realities. I sometimes wonder how it might have been affected if I had had children of my own. But here's the thing, I have never

wanted to have children. I've never had that gut-wrenching deep desire in my body to reproduce. I've always thought that if I was in the right relationship at the right time then perhaps, I might have wanted a child. But not on my own. The right relationship never came along during my reproductive years. Perhaps I spent them in unsuitable relationships unconsciously setting myself up to be unproductive. But ticking clocks have a way of focusing the mind. I knew that I didn't want to wake up on my 40th birthday, childless, because I had forgotten to make a decision. And so, I decided.

It's a strange thing to be single, childless, ambivalent and in possession of (one supposes) a productive womb. Stranger still are others' opinions about my womb, left languishing and idle whilst theirs refuses to produce... social codes I was unaware of were broken, guilt trips foisted upon me ... 'So, you've never thought of having a child?' ... 'Even on your own?' ... and when I marry a man who has two older children from a previous marriage the commentary shifts ... 'isn't that lovely ... you'll have step-children' ... as though my womb can now be decommissioned entirely ... my womanhood upgraded to step-motherhood, a role I never auditioned for, applied for, nor want.

My international students struggle with anxiety and depression. Away from home and disconnected from their social circles, their mental health is being affected by this crisis. I know about anxiety. I also research anxiety. I know I need to be more than their teacher. I need to do more as their teacher. Holding and containing ... isn't that good-enough mothering, by just another name?

It's now 7.45 a.m. and I'm seated in a tiny waiting room between the stairs and the operating theatre. The shift must begin around 8 because a stream of people pass by me as they bound up the stairs and disappear down a corridor to emerge a few minutes later in green scrubs and clogs. A heavily pregnant woman walks slowly past me as her partner looks around for somewhere to drop his empty coffee cup ... He stands out in the corridor, the only person dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt ... 'they must be on their way to a delivery suite' I think to myself. 'I'll just close over this door for a moment if you don't mind' says one of the

anonymous, green-scrubbed people ... I can see through the frosted glass a pregnant woman being quickly rushed by on a trolley surrounded by more green-scrubbed people.

I cannot think, my brain is smothered by anxiety and worry. Papers lie unfinished, beckoning at me from a pile in the corner of my office. I want to talk about how hard it is to concentrate, to focus and to complete work ... or about how afraid I feel sometimes. But I'm not a mother. And women's work is mother's work in this crisis and my unproductive womb once again excludes me from the conversation. Lying on the table in the theatre, the final checks are made ... 'I'll give you some of the good stuff now' the anaesthetist says ... my consultant talks me through the hysteroscopy ... they will insert a camera into my uterus to see why I am bleeding ... biopsy ... pathology ... tests ... six weeks for results ... As the oxygen mask descends on my face the medical team begin their examination of my womb ... anointed by others as empty and disappointed.

My mother was in this place once. Perhaps even in this theatre. Before there was me. My current anxieties focus on motherhood and the metaphor of mothering: am I good enough, when and where, seemingly overnight and by unspoken consensus, the way I had been proceeding (like my womb) may not be good enough. Without physical evidence of my productivity in the children to whom I must attend when protective motherhood calls, or does it?