
Putting It All on the Table: Making Visible the Material Realities of Single-Mother Graduate Student Writers

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At 4:00 a.m. on a Monday morning, the alarm on my phone wakes me with a gentle tune that increases in volume with each passing moment. I reach for it without much trouble, for I had been anticipating the alarm even as I slept; after all, obeying it is vital for catching a couple of hours of what I hope will be uninterrupted writing time while my five-year-old stays sleeping. After turning it off, I rise and make my way into the living room where a soft light illuminates the dining table that will, for this morning, become my writing table. On it, there is still a drinking glass and a crumpled napkin stained with spaghetti sauce, left over from last night's dinner; these objects were missed by that sleeping child who, the night before, had been tasked with clearing the table. I collect the missed objects and bring them into the kitchen, where I also boil water for coffee.

As the water heats up, I set up my regular but always temporary writing station—I wipe down the table, then remove my laptop from the laptop bag, plug it in, and place it on the table. When I pull out a chair to sit down, I find my son's latest literary obsession, the LEGO DC Comics Super Heroes Visual Dictionary, on the seat, covered in dozens of LEGO pieces. Carefully, I pick the book up and place it on the coffee table nearby, noticing the unemptied Star Wars lunch box from the previous Friday is there, too. The kettle clicks off in that moment. The water for coffee is ready. I grab the lunchbox and head back into the kitchen. It's 4:15.

By the time I sit down to write—now that the chair is cleared; the lunchbox is emptied, cleaned, and ready to be filled with that day's lunch; and my coffee is ready—it's 4:30. In the next moment, I'm consumed in a hushed flurry of activity as I open books and printed articles that have been scribbled all over in my purple-inked handwriting; I click open documents and type addresses in the navigation bar as I take intermittent sips from the first of very many cups of coffee I'll surely have that day. The writing can finally begin now, but I already sense the imminent end, and I distract myself with reminders to be quiet lest I wake my son any sooner than necessary. I wade through some forced and uninspired writing for about an hour until, at 5:45, I hear a soft voice

Abstract

In this autoethnographic article, I argue that the recent and trending new materialist focus within composition studies—which tends to assume the privilege of agency and unmitigated choice on behalf of writers regarding their writing environments (Prior and Shipka, 2002; Alexis, 2016)—doesn't necessarily hold space for writers whose writing environments regularly yield to and are shaped by the preferences, habits, and material effects of actors outside of themselves—namely, their children. In making my argument about the particular effects of such multiagent writing environments, I use a materialist lens to reveal and analyze my own and other single mother graduate student writers' (SMGSWs) scenes of writing, hoping to invite reflection on what assumptions we may hold about the writing environments of our students, our colleagues, and ourselves.

Keywords

graduate student writing, writing environments, single mothers, new materialism

make an undeniable request from the other room: “Mommy, will you come snuggle me?” Of course I will, and I do. On this morning, an hour of writing is all I’ll get. I leave the sentence unfinished, sure I will remember my train of thought when I again sit down to write—whenever that might be.

This narrative glimpse into my life depicts the scene that comes to mind upon reading Cydney Alexis’s “The Material Culture of Writing,” which she begins by inviting readers to imagine their own writing environment (83). Following this prompt, Alexis provides several examples of different writers and their respective writing environments, implying that writing environments are as varied as the writers who inhabit them (83). Ultimately, however, she suggests that despite their inherent differences, there is a common thread among *all* writers and their environments: “No matter what environment you typically write in, one thing is fairly certain: you have developed preferences around it, you have populated it with objects, and your behavior within it follows some sort of routine” (83). Underpinning her argument, then, is the assertion that writers have unmitigated agency in “creat[ing]” their writing environments (84).

However, as evidenced by the vignette that opens this article, such an assertion doesn’t hold true for all writers. It shadows the complex nature of *multiagent* writing environments¹ in which the writer is but one actor whose preferences, objects, and behaviors shape a writing environment. Still, Alexis offers a description of writing environments that helps me see where multiagent writing environments might find a fit adjacent to her argument. In a helpful reconceptualization of “writing environments,” Alexis adapts the concept of “writing habitats” (83), using it “to describe the rich, constructed environments that *writers create* to work in” (84; my emphasis). Moreover, she suggests that writing habitats are “complex systems” and that “[t]hinking of our writing spaces as habitats changes our perception of their ecologies” (84). Though I am making a divergent point, Alexis’s reconceptualization is instructive for my purposes of exploring the nuances within multiagent writing habitats, particularly the way those writing

habitats are shaped by the larger ecology of which they are just a piece. As Marilyn M. Cooper articulates, “An important characteristic of ecological systems is that they are inherently dynamic; though their structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly changing...” (368).² Therefore, in this article, I aim to “forward” (Harris) Alexis’s conceptualization of writing habitats by considering how these habitats may be affected not just by the writer’s preferences but also by other human actors and *their* preferences, and, in turn, how the multiagent ecology of a writing habitat affects a writer’s work.

Ultimately, while I find Alexis’s primary claim compelling and instructive for helping me better understand my own writing environments, I intend to complicate her thesis by pulling back the curtain on the writing environments of a particular group of writers—single-mother graduate student writers (hereafter referred to as SMGSWs).³ These writers’ writing habitats often yield to the concerns, material effects, and preferences of other agents—namely, their children. In short, though members of this group do, indeed, have preferences, objects, and routines that shape their writing environments and practices, these elements are never without the ever-present influence (sometimes ethereal, sometimes physical, sometimes material) of their child/children and their child’s/children’s preferences, objects, and routines (or lack thereof), all of which may also shape these writers’ writing habitats and often in unpredictable ways.⁴

Taking a close look at the moments in which SMGSWs write and the materiality of the environments in which that writing happens reveals unseen aspects of the unique position they occupy. In this way, this project also attempts to fill gaps in research on graduate student writers *and* on graduate student single mothers. While the work of making visible mothers’ positionality within academia generally (see Yoo Nora et al.), and mothers in graduate school more specifically (see Eisenbach; Grenier and Burke; Schriever), continues to gain traction, the distinct voices of single-mother graduate students—with rare exception—continue to be folded into other accounts within the research on motherhood in academia,

1 This phrase—*multiagent writing environment*—is not of my own making; it was offered by one of the generous reviewers of this article, and it defines so well the writing environments of focus in this article that I adopted it during revisions. I want, here, to express my gratitude and give credit to that reviewer.

2 Cooper uses a social constructionist framework; however, this more generalized description of ecological systems is useful for seeing a multiagent *material* (rather than explicitly social) writing environment as something larger than the sum of its individual parts.

3 The identifier *single mother* is not singularly definable; it is a catch-all identifier that highlights being partner-less while raising a child as a female-identifying person. However, the shape of individuals’ lives—their material and relational circumstances—are multiplicitous and, thus, create a wide range of what single motherhood looks like in real time. Some single mothers are the sole parent while others co-parent. Likewise, the parenting schedules of single mothers vary widely. Despite the inherent differences, considering the ways SMGSWs balance parenthood and academic-writing work promises to complicate our assumptions about writing environments.

4 It is not, of course, just single mothers who experience complicating circumstances in graduate school. While this essay is explicitly focused on SMGSWs, there are also accounts of single fathers navigating graduate school, and academia more broadly. See, for example, Charles Bane’s “Balancing Diapers and A Doctorate: The Adventures of a Single Dad in Grad School” and Eric H. Du Plessis’s “Single Dad in Academia: Fatherhood and the Redemption of Scholarship.” Scholars are also writing about the complicated nature of being a partnered father and an academic writer. See, for example, David Haven Blake’s “On Writing and Rearing,” Alex Vernon’s “It’s a Chapter-Book, Huh: Teaching, Writing, and Early Fatherhood,” and Martina Dickson and James Dickson’s “‘Story Time is My Duty’: Expatriate Academic Fathers’ Experiences of Balancing Their Work and Home Lives.”

causing an oversight of their unique position. Alex Hanson makes this point in her piece “Career Killer Survival Kit: Centering Single Mom Perspectives in Composition and Rhetoric,” writing that “the challenges and experiences of a single parent can get lost in the challenges and experiences of parents more generally” and that single-mother graduate students are among the “various identities [that] get erased in that conflation [of parenting identities]” (34). Unfortunately, such an erasure keeps hidden the “unique challenges” (Ellis and Gullion 151) graduate student mothers, particularly single mothers, face.

These unique challenges stem from the frictional intersection of disparate identities. Erin Graybill Ellis and Jessica Smartt Gullion, in “You Must Be Superwoman!': How Graduate Student Mothers Negotiate Conflicting Roles,” write,

Graduate students are expected to treat their graduate study as a full-time job, especially if receiving funding from their departments. Meanwhile, [graduate student mothers] face expectations from the dominant culture to be “good mothers” and practice intensive mothering. The full-time demands of motherhood and graduate school are incompatible idealizations graduate student mothers must negotiate. (151)

Though Ellis and Guillion are focused on graduate student mothers in general, these cultural scripts are true for single-mother graduate students, as well. Moreover, single-mother graduate students shoulder the additional burden of negotiating “cultural stereotypes of single mothers as bad mothers” (Duquaine-Watson 38) while also facing precarious circumstances relating to “financial matters, child care, [and] time constraints” (37). It is not my explicit goal to reattend to these broader issues, which undoubtedly have a significant and unique impact on single-mother graduate students; however, keeping in mind the fact of their unavoidable influence on a single mother’s quotidian experience as we look at SMGSWs’ scenes of writing further contextualizes the experiences of these women, as these broader concerns are seldom far from her mind.

To be sure, others have already started doing the work of calling attention specifically to single-mother graduate students with an emphatic call for wider attention to the detrimental effects institutionalized norms and expectations often have on this population. In a collaboratively written piece titled “(Re)Producing (E)Motions: Motherhood, Academic Spaces, and Neoliberal Times,” Alexandria Hanson, Alejandra I. Ramírez, April M. Cobos, Heather Lishartke, and Skye Roberson highlight an underrecognized reality: “As single-mother graduate students, we work against stigmas of single motherhood in the neoliberal academy to prove ourselves as dedicated, capable, and innovative scholars” (2). They assert that “neoliberal assumptions about the ideal graduate student”

cause “academic institutions [to] often miss out on the strengths of single mothers!” (2). Such assumptions include “mental flexibility, competitive nature (not just with others but themselves), an entrepreneurial spirit, adaptability to precarious environments, and the ability to remain emotionally detached” (2). For single mothers, these “idealized neoliberal worker” norms are untenable.

Unfortunately, much of the reason the academy “miss[es] out” on what single-mother graduate students have to offer—strengths not necessarily associated with neoliberal standards—stems from single-mother academics feeling the need to stay silent about their circumstances. Ruth Osorio, in “Constellating with Our Foremothers,” calls attention to this silencing, writing that “mothers [in the academy] who deviated from the heteronormative, partnered, white scripts for motherhood faced increased pressure to keep their family roles discrete in the workplace. Their stories, therefore, were shoved into the darkness, leaving only the whispers passed among mothers and mothers-to-be desperately seeking stories, all while writing their own.” This “strategy” of staying silent about one’s motherhood within academic spaces is termed “maternal invisibility” by Karen Danna Lynch, who argues that staying “invisible” as a mother in academic spaces “allows student mothers to appear to be ‘just students’, preserving a cultural form in which a graduate student is 100% committed to their work, 100% of the time” (596). However, as noted, remaining silent works against the success of academic mothers, including single-mother graduate students whose existence is underrecognized and not well understood.

By revealing private and complicated scenes of writing, I am working to fill the gap in understanding Summer R. Cunningham articulates about her experience as a SMGSW. She writes, “[A]lthough 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” (“Experiments” 38). For this reason, I follow the scholars who are “making space” (Hanson, “Making Space”; Osorio) for and bringing visibility (Cunningham, “Experiments”) to this population by adding my own story to those already shared—stories of mother academics whose very presence in the academy challenges institutional norms and expectations.

My own experience as an SMGSW provides me a valuable perspective for speaking about this reality,⁵ and it also demands that I not stay silent. Though it has been established that “[g]raduate student mothers are at a higher risk of attrition than almost any other group in American universities” (Ellis and Guillion 153) and that “[t]he worst situation is

5 I consider myself very fortunate, for my son’s father is a present, engaged, reliable, and trustworthy parent who occasionally keeps our son outside of our agreed-upon parenting schedule so I might have some “extra” time to write uninterrupted. Many SMGSWs, I recognize, don’t even have that option available to them.

to be a single academic parent with children” (Ballif et al. 182), statistics regarding graduate student *single mothers* are sparse.⁶ These two facts combined—a high risk of attrition for graduate student mothers and statistical underrepresentation of graduate student single mothers—doesn’t suggest to me that I am “special,” some anomaly in the academy. It also doesn’t suggest to me that there is just a lack of single mothers with the intellect and desire to earn graduate degrees; rather, it reaffirms that as an institution, we have set up unrealistic expectations, ignored the material realities, and silenced the voices of those with marginalized identities in the academy, and that single-mother graduate students are included under that umbrella. To be a single mother *or* a graduate student is to manage a barrage of overwhelming expectations, so much so that the number of those who occupy an arguably unthinkable position at the intersection of those identities may be presumed too insignificant to even report on. And yet, *we are here*.

Moreover, this unfortunate oversight has resulted in the “gifts” of aspiring single-mother graduate students being “buried or aborted,” a circumstance alluded to by Hanson et al. and one I pick up from Adrienne Rich in “When We Dead Awaken”:

An important insight of the radical women’s movement, for me, has been how divisive and how ultimately destructive is this myth of the special woman, who is also the token woman. Every one of us here in this room has had great luck—we are teachers, writers, academicians; our own gifts could not have been enough, for we all know women whose gifts are buried or aborted. Our struggles can have meaning only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts—and whose very being—continue to be thwarted. (21)

Rich’s words here inspire me to make my own experiences “have meaning” by “help[ing] to change the lives” of others who have been left behind by the academy. I hope I can do so simply by sharing my experiences as a SMGSW and analyzing them through a materialist lens. It is my intention to reveal my own private moments of writing in an unpredictable and dynamic space shared with my child so as to join the project of making space for marginalized parents in the academy by bringing awareness to previously unconsidered aspects of the lives and work of SMGSWs: the in situ writing scene, the multiagent habitat in which it often occurs, and the complexity of its ecology.

At the heart of this project, then, are several aims. The first is to encourage a shift in the academic atmosphere regarding graduate

student parents, particularly single mothers. However, I do this not by calling attention to the systemic problems already attended to by numerous studies on motherhood and academia but by calling attention to the minutia, the quotidian, the otherwise unseen realities of these women. An additional aim, then, is to encourage more research that investigates the multiagent writing environments of student writers more broadly. That is, while I am exploring the multiagent writing habitats of SMGSWs, employing a similar analytical framework to investigate the multiagent writing habitats of other academic-writer populations holds potential for deepening our understanding of what faculty, graduate, and undergraduate writers face as they navigate the academy.

To this end, what follows is my attempt to heed, in part, the call for researchers “to learn more about the experiences of [other graduate student parents] at the ‘margins,’” including single parents (Murphy and Cloutier-Fisher 38), as well as the call for more research that considers the way different familial circumstances, including single parenthood, affect mothers specifically in rhetoric and composition (see Hanson, “Career” 35; Nora et al. 142). Hanson, too, reminds us that “representations of single mothers are largely absent from academic scholarship more generally and from composition and rhetoric in particular” (“Career” 35) and that scholars “need to look at how the field has represented single motherhood and how the material conditions and embodied experiences of single mothers [in the field] are rendered invisible” (36). Indeed, the work of revealing SMGSWs’ experiences has already begun. For example, Hanson et al. describe, in a unified voice, their standard morning routine, one that accurately describes my own quotidian experience:

The five of us are in different time zones, but we are all awake by 6 a.m., and the first things on our minds (unless we were also dreaming of them!) are our children, our dissertations, writing projects, and side hustles. As emergent domestic intellectuals, we have our schedules, alarms, and writing spaces sharpened, rehearsed, and repeated hundreds of times over the course of a typical day. By 9 a.m. we have all eaten breakfast, gotten our seven children dressed, checked and responded to urgent emails, got some dissertation writing in, commuted (approximately an hour), dropped our kids off at their schools, and arrived on campus ready to teach. (2)

6 The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that in 2007-2008, of all master’s degree students (both male and female) with dependents, 25% were married and 10.5% were unmarried, while 48% were unmarried with no dependents. In the same year, of doctoral students with dependents, 22.5% were married and only 5.9% were unmarried, while 54.3% were unmarried with no dependents (Chen et al.). Keeping in mind the contextualizing fact that the majority of single parents are female, these data tell us that while there is only a slight decrease in the percentage of students married with dependents between masters and doctoral programs (10%), the decrease in students unmarried with dependents from masters to doctoral programs is much more stark (56%). Meanwhile, the percentage of those who are unmarried with no dependents increased by 13%. Attending to the material realities of these student groups is an important step towards making sense of these statistics.

The unified voice these SMGSWs use here is effective for its connoted tone of solidarity. As I read their words, I know my voice is in chorus with theirs.

However, while recounting common SMGSW experiences in a unified voice is necessary and useful, so too is exploring the more nuanced, shifting, multifaceted experiences these academic mothers have as they do the actual writing in private spaces. On that point, I follow Cydney Alexis and Hannah Rule when they write in the introduction to their 2022 edited collection, *The Material Culture of Writing*, that “a material culture approach foregrounds and maintains focus on the everyday artifact as meaningful and as a revealer of culture and history, as a way to account for the experiences and lives of particular people, as well as communities, in situated contexts” (5). It is my hope that by narrowing in on particular scenes of SMGSWs writing and thereby highlighting individual experiences, we can begin to see how a concept as seemingly indisputable as “writers create their writing environments” often does not reflect the lived realities of SMGSWs. Such a revelation may allow us to begin to understand the material effects of occupying this marginalized identity not only within rhetoric and composition but also within disciplines across the academy. It is my aim to bring awareness to this positionality just as other scholars are seeking to understand the material effects of other marginalized folks braving our field, including LGBTQ+ populations (see the work of Stacy Waite, Jonathan Alexander, and Eric Darnell Pritchard), racial minorities (see the work of Carmen Kynard and Aja Martinez), and those with disabilities (see the work of Jay Dolmage, Elisabeth L. Miller, and Brenda Jo Brueggemann). My goal here is not to equate my own experiences with—or otherwise flatten—the experiences of individuals within these varied marginalized groups but instead to add to the rich complexity of representational narratives in hopes of helping further develop theories of writing that may help us better understand the material complexities shaping a variety of writers’ writing habitats.

Thus, inspired by Rule’s approach to looking at “writing’s rooms” in situ, I analyze scenes of SMGSWs’ moments of writing in order to complicate Alexis’s notion that writing environments necessarily reflect the preferences of the writer. At times, I quote narrative accounts from academic-mother writers who are not single mothers but who have revealed scenes of writing in which they are the sole adult available to give care to their child who is in the room as they are writing. This choice is reflective of the fact that there are so few in situ accounts of SMGSWs writing. I hope, then, that this study will prompt other SMGSWs to share their own experiences. Ultimately, attending to the materiality of these SMGSWs’ scenes of writing allows us to better understand how very material a writer’s identity outside being an academician can be in shaping their performance as an academician.

In order to build on previous work on mother-scholars in the field and offer an additional perspective on this familiar topic, I use a materialist lens to highlight just how unpredictable, unstable, and complicated writing habitats can be for SMGSWs and argue that research in the field of rhetoric and composition ought to expand the focus of learning how writers write to include the oftentimes complicated material realities shaping the writing environments of writers occupying marginalized identities across the academy. To that end, I analyze my own experiences, as well as those scant few that have been documented within previous work, and I find a thinking partner in Linda Brodkey, who is interested in “disrupting the scene of writing through acts of the imagination that revise the scene to accommodate our students and ourselves—as writers and as readers” (60), and, I’d like to add, as single mothers. I intend to make visible the otherwise unseen (and therefore unrecognized) complex set of circumstances that make scheduled, uninterrupted writing time in a stable and preferred environment an unattainable and idealized “scene of writing” (60) for many SMGSWs. More important, by highlighting the particular material limitations single mothers face in private spaces (where they are mothers and writers) as they attempt to compose texts that will determine their level of success in public arenas (where they are academics), colleagues, mentors, and employers might better understand that what is needed as much as, if not more than, encouragement and praise is patience and flexibility dictated by an ethics of care on both an interpersonal and institutional level.⁷

Integral to making my argument that SMGSWs have a unique and unpredictable set of circumstances surrounding their writing practices is Sara Ahmed’s concept of “orientations,” which allows me to show how the dual identities of single mother and graduate student writer are constantly being oriented toward and away from each other, largely influenced by the presence of children and/or children’s material objects. Equally important to establish is my own argument’s situatedness in the materialist theories Stacey Pigg collectively describes as “lines of inquiry focused on environments, materialities, and infrastructures [that] emphasize how ‘everything else’ beyond students’ brains and bodies play a significant role in practices like reading and writing” (6). Working from this framework allows us to see the intense effect single parents’ quotidian experiences have on their writing lives.

AN AMBIVALENT ORIENTATION TO OUR WRITING/ CRAFTING/DINING TABLE

I go into my son’s room and duck under the sheets and blankets draped around his bed and binder-clipped to the chairs missing from our table (the “fort fairy” had made a visit the night before my son turned five just a week prior). I climb into his bottom bunk where he lies. He is cocooned in a Spiderman sleeping bag,

⁷ For lists of recommendations on how to make academic spaces more inclusive of single-mother graduate students, see Hanson et al. and Hanson, “Career Killer Survival Kit.”

having refused to sleep between his actual bed sheets the night before, so I pull the ignored Minion comforter over my own body as I snuggle up next to him. This is our SOP: he wakes up and calls for me. I go in. We talk for a minute about dreams and sleep before he inevitably asks me one of two (or both) questions: What are we having for breakfast? and Do we have time to play? On this morning, he asks me both. Until this moment, I hadn't considered either, but at the crux of each is our table, presently strewn with articles and books that are open, face down, and stacked on top of one another. These writing artifacts surround my open laptop, the light of which illuminates the living room. And though I cannot see it now, I know there's an open document on the screen, and I can almost feel the cursor blink where I stopped writing midsentence when Elwood first called for me. Regardless of what we eat or if we play, the table will have to be cleared and repurposed for the second time that morning. It will shift from my writing habitat to our breakfast table.

My son's and my table has become the cornerstone of our two-person household—it's where we eat, where we make art, and where we build with LEGOs, conduct science experiments, and take inventory of rock collections. It's also where I do nearly all of my writing. For this reason, our table is not only the lynchpin of our household activity but also the lynchpin of my "writing habitat" and, therefore, will serve as the primary object under analysis while considering the "chronotopic lamination of [my] literate activity" (Prior and Shipka 181). Paul Prior and Jody Shipka define "chronotopic lamination" as "the dispersed and fluid chains of place, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action, the ways multiple activity footings are simultaneously held and managed" (181). When, how, and why I become oriented towards or away from that writing/crafting/dining table is seldom dictated solely by my own needs or desires. However, it is, more often than not, related to the two primary identities I hold: a single mother and a graduate student writer.

Ahmed, in her discussion of "how orientations matter," focuses on "the table" as an "orientation device" (235). She analyzes German philosopher Edmund Husserl's orientation toward his own writing table—a central object for his endeavors in establishing the discipline of phenomenology—and makes the point that Husserl "attends to the writing table, which becomes 'the table' by keeping the domestic world behind him. This domestic world, which surrounds the philosopher, must be 'put aside' or even 'put to one side' in his turn toward objects as objects of perception" (249). This description of Husserl's writing table and his ability to orient himself towards it by turning away from the domestic serves Alexis's argument that writers do indeed create their environments.

However, Ahmed poses some productive questions that help me complicate that notion: "Who faces the writing table? Does the writing table have a face, which points it towards some bodies rather than others?" (250). These questions prompt a different understanding of the table's place in particular writers' writing habitats,

one largely dependent on managing one's multiple identities—or, to put it in the words of Prior and Shipka, one's orientation to the table is dependent on "h[olding] and manag[ing] multiple activity footings [simultaneously]" (181). Drawing on Rich's account in *Of Women Born*, in which Rich is trying to write a letter with her young children in the room, Ahmed presents a valuable conclusion: for some—namely mothers—there is no "putting aside" the domestic world while attending to the writing table:

We can see from the point of view of the mother, who is also a writer . . . that giving attention to the objects of writing, facing those objects, becomes impossible: the children, even if they are behind you, literally pull you away. . . . For some, having time for writing, which means time to face the table upon which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available given the ongoing labor of other attachments, which literally pull them away. So whether we can sustain our orientation toward the writing table depends on other orientations, which affect what we can face at any given moment in time. (250)

This excerpt from Ahmed characterizes well the shifting and unsustainable orientation I have towards my son's and my writing/crafting/dining table when I approach the table as a writer. For me, to "face the table upon which writing happens" is to first face the table as a mother and as a domestic laborer, for the table is the center of domestic activity.

Ultimately, there is no putting the domestic aside, for even after I clear the remnants of the previous night's dinner and establish my writing station, my sleeping son's presence dictates, from across the house, the parameters of the shape my writing act can take: I must be quiet and work quickly, for as soon as he wakes, I will be "pulled away" from my writing. I am reminded here of Hanson's account of her own experiences as an SMGSW: "I could no longer count on getting any work done after my daughter went to bed because when she woke up, I was her only means of support" ("Career Killer" 34). Likewise, for me, knowing my son's needs and desires may at any moment interrupt my writing makes my orientation to the table as a writer unsustainable and tenuous, for I am the sole parent in the house. My orientation to the table, for this reason, is never fully as an unimpeded writer *even* in moments of writing so long as my son is physically present.

Identifying the parameters of how my writing is allowed to get done in these moments is part of understanding the layers within the chronotopic lamination of my writing environment. In taking up "discussions of embodiment" in relation to writing, Prior and Shipka posit "that acts of writing are themselves issues of managing a body in space and that embodied literate activity is woven out of profoundly heterogenous chains of acts, scenes, and actors oriented to diverse ends" (230). My own embodied writing practice must be altered when holding the simultaneous positions of single mother and graduate student writer. My writing body must be managed

in that space around the writing table. Typing loudly, talking ideas out or reading aloud, pacing the house while I think—all habits of my unhampered writing practice—must be eliminated, or at least tempered, for any of these embodied activities associated with my writing could cause my son to wake sooner than he might if the house was completely quiet, devoid of my writerly activity. Thus, even when my son is not literally pulling me away—even when he is sleeping and in a completely different room—my writing habitat, constituted only in part by my preferences and habits, yields to his presence.

THE OBJECTS ON OUR WRITING/CRAFTING/ DINING TABLE

It is now 4:45 p.m., and we have just arrived home from our days at our respective schools. In the eleven-hour interim since my child pulled me from my morning writing session, I have made lunches for both him and myself; fed, dressed, and otherwise prepared him for his school day; dropped him off at preschool; commuted an hour to my university; prepped for and taught an adjunct class; eaten lunch while grading; signed Elwood up for swim lessons; finished reading for just one of the two graduate seminars I attend on Tuesdays; consumed four cups of coffee to my one glass of water; and made the hour commute back home just in time to pick Elwood up. He seems as ready to rest as I feel.

As soon as we walk in the door of our house, Elwood asks if he can play on his tablet for a little while. I pretend to mull this over for a minute. “Well, I don’t know, bud. Maybe we can sit and play together first,” I respond, the academic in me hoping he rejects my offer and the mother in me hoping he takes me up on it.

“No, thank you,” he says, laying the manners on thick. “I just want to have some screen time.” We are both silent for a moment before he exclaims, “I know! Let’s both have screen time!” I am both relieved and disappointed, but mostly relieved. I agree, and we take up our respective positions—me at the table, he on the couch—and for ten glorious minutes, it is silent except for the game music coming from his tablet, a noise I learned to block out long ago. I attend to the blinking cursor, picking up where I left off midsentence nearly twelve hours prior, but the thought I’d had is gone. I reassure myself it will come back if I just read what I have written from the top. I begin reading, revising small bits along the way, but only make it half-way through before he asks for a snack.

I get up from the table to slice some apples for him, and by the time I return, he has migrated onto the floor and has begun building with his PlusPluses (little plus-shaped building blocks). As soon as I reenter the living room from the kitchen, he asks me if I can play with him, and my heart sinks. I hesitate. “I thought we were having screen time,” I say.

“We were, but my tablet ran out of batteries.”

“Oh, okay. We can just plug it in, and you can sit at the table with me.”

“That’s okay, Mommy. I changed my mind. Can we just play?”

Negotiation ensues, and he agrees to let me have twenty more minutes of screen time while he begins playing. We set a timer, and I assure him I will join him just as soon as the timer goes off.

I sit back down to my laptop and pick up where I left off reading my draft. Another few minutes pass, and I begin to focus again despite the soft noises from Elwood who sits on the floor beside me, building. Before long, he stands up and approaches our table. Upon it he places a rainbow he’s made from his PlusPlus pieces (fig. 1). “Look, Mommy!” he says. “I made you a rainbow!”

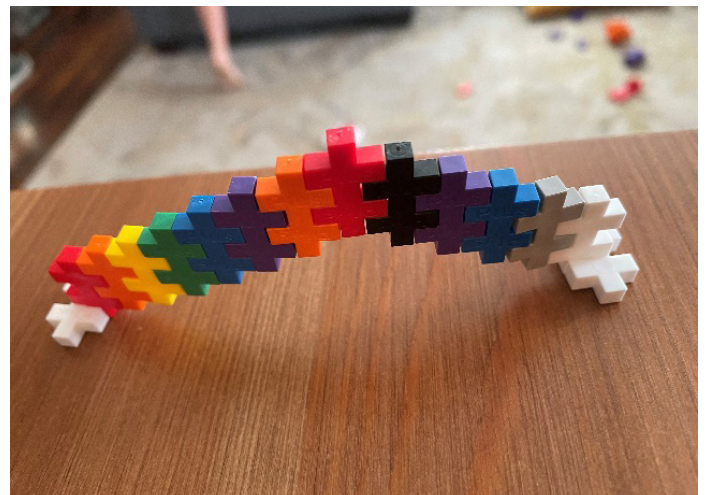


Figure 1. E’s PlusPlus rainbow he made for me, which becomes an agent in my writing habitat.

This narrative slice features not only the table but also the objects that collect on the table, all of which become objects within my writing habitat (regardless of my preferences and with no regard for my routine). Also crucial to this scene is, of course, my son, who is very much awake and actively engaged in the room. He is an agent populating my current writing habitat and one whose age makes him particularly prone to doing and saying unpredictable things that inform the ecology of this habitat. His presence and its material effects are all part of “the dance of agency” (Pickering 78), a concept I pick up from Andrew Pickering and adapt for my analysis. In explaining this concept, Pickering uses “agency’ . . . to refer directly to action, doing things that are consequential in the world” and asserts that humans are no more agents than the material nonhuman entities within an environment (78). Following this, the human agents—my son and me—and the nonhuman agents—the tablet, the table, the computer, the rainbow, the apple slices—all have agency with the potential to influence the writing-habitat ecology in unpredictable ways. After all, agency is

“emergent,” as Pickering asserts (78). He writes, “The world is too lively. We can interfere performatively with it, and it will respond, but there is no guarantee whatsoever that the response will be what we expect” (79). This observation resonates well here, for nothing in the scene played out as I had hoped. The dance of agency at play is influenced by Elwood whose 1) suggestion that we have screen time together and 2) “promise” to me that I can have twenty uninterrupted minutes are malleable and fleeting, his feelings about these circumstances subject to change in a moment’s notice without any concern for me as a writer. But it is also influenced by his tablet (which runs out of battery and consequently influences Elwood’s course of action), the rainbow he creates (which I accidentally knock off the table while using the mouse to navigate through my essay on screen, causing momentarily hurt feelings), and the apple slices (whose presence required the initial separation of writer from writing), still uneaten and hiding behind my laptop. The domestic permeates the writing habitat. Far from a stable and predictable writing environment curated by me according to my preferences, this is, nonetheless, the environment in which I sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully get writing done (fig. 2).

This dance of agency can also be seen in one of the few published in situ accounts of writing from another SMGSW, Alex Hanson. Her account provides a “snapshot of [her] composition life” (“Making Space” 31) in which she describes what is, to me, a very familiar scene. In this snapshot, Hanson’s 5½-year-old daughter, Olivia, is competing for her attention while Hanson sits at the dining-turned-writing table, attempting to finish transcribing an interview. Despite being given permission to “do whatever she wants until [Hanson] is done” (words I, myself, have said to Elwood plenty of times), Olivia instead “integrates herself into the workflow” (31). Hanson describes the scene: “Instead of going off to do her own thing, she climbs under the dining table and into my lap, listening to the audio and quickly picking up on how my Esc key is my Play and Pause button” (31). Olivia joins in pushing the keys and, eventually—after a minor incident that requires Hanson to shift fully from academician to mother and put out the fire of her young child’s hurt feelings—Olivia becomes Hanson’s “assistant,” an agent within Hanson’s writing habitat.

In this “snapshot,” Olivia’s curiosities, energy, and courage to experiment with her mother’s writing machine result in a material reorientation of Hanson’s writing habitat—of her relationship to the stopgap writing table and the writing objects upon it. When Olivia becomes a part of the writing practice, she becomes another agent in the dance of agency taking place between her mother/cowriter and the writing objects. This reorientation is sustained until the two human agents, along with the nonhuman agents (the table, the computer, the keyboard) finish the work *together*: “And after half an hour of this,” Hanson writes, “of her and me pushing keys, of her asking questions about the voice coming from my computer, of her trying to match the words from that voice with the words on my computer screen, we finish and move away from the computer and into the world of her kindergarten classroom” (31). The domestic concerns, present throughout the writing scene, finally take over completely. The writing is left behind as the two recent cowriters “move away” from the objects of writing—the table, the computer, the keyboard—now oriented by Olivia’s needs and wants for playtime and engaged imagination.

The dance of agency and its unpredictable effect on the ecology of our writing habitats is summarized well by Loren Marquez in “Narrating Our Lives: Retelling Mothering and Professional Work in Composition Studies.” Marquez, though not an SMGSW herself, describes a scene reminiscent of Hanson’s and my own in which she tries to get some writing done as the only caretaker in the house with her young son. She sits beside her son (whom she hopes will be busied enough with his toys)—he in a gated area and she on the couch—until his persistent protestations land her on the floor inside the gated play area with her laptop in tow. Despite the fact that an actual writing table is not present in this scene, the space she shares with her son becomes her writing habitat, one in which she is unable to turn fully towards the writing and away from her domestic world. For Marquez then, the metaphorical writing table is the gated floor area in which she sits typing while her son plays—the multiagent, multiuse habitat where she juggles her multiple identities simultaneously. She writes, “This picture is representative of being a mother with small children in academia: oscillating back-and-forth between academic work and your children’s needs, problem-solving, multitasking, and in the end, realizing this is the reality in which you must accomplish your work” (78). Sometimes that reality includes a physical table in relation to which we can work to orient ourselves. Other times that “table” is the steering wheel of our cars where we sneak some writing in during a soccer practice, our laps on which we take a minute to jot down notes or ideas for revision while waiting with a sick child for the pediatrician, or the kitchen counter while we wait for the pasta water to boil as a child begs for a snack. When moments of writing happen in the same space as another agent, especially one’s child, a mother’s orientation to a writing habitat is seldom stable. And with no expectation of relief by another parent, the likelihood of maintaining a stable orientation to a writing habitat as a writer is even less likely.

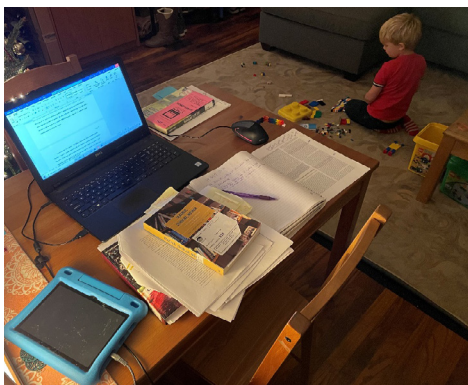


Figure 2.
A glimpse at
my multiagent
and often
unpredictable
writing habitat.

THE ROLE OF THE CRAFTING TABLE

The timer goes off. I keep my promise and close my laptop. It is time to build LEGOs and play whatever game Elwood has constructed today. I follow his inconsistent and nonsensical rules, and, at least in this instance, I don't mind doing so. I'm glad to be required to reorient myself to the table as a mother and a playmate; there is very little, if any, room for the writer here. And that is a gift. Instead of wondering how I will incorporate materialist theories into my writing, I play the role of Yay (fig. 3) as I think about what we have in the house that might pass as dinner.

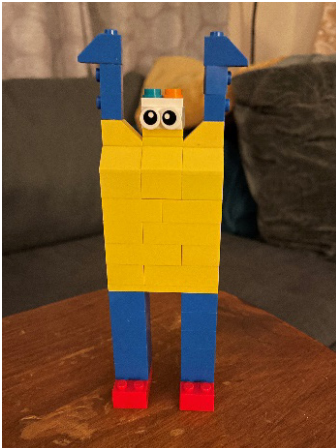


Figure 3. The character of Yay, built by Elwood and assigned to me. Yay becomes an agent in my writing habitat, a result of the needs and desires of another agent—my son. But Yay also serves my writing by helping me mentally disengage from it.

If I were able to create a writing habitat that reflects my preferences, includes my objects, and honors my routines, I would require a timer that signals when it is time for a nonnegotiable break. After all, my writing process requires that I completely “disengage” (Frankel) with the writing at hand, that I “put aside” the writing and turn *towards* the domestic (or other) world(s). It requires that I mentally engage with something outside the theories and concepts and texts I am working with. It requires that I step out of my writerly identity and embody other identities I cherish and depend upon for my sense of self. One of those identities, is, of course, that of being a mother. In oscillating between identities, the table remains, but my orientation to it shifts; in these moments it is no longer my writing table but my son's and my activity table. So, despite the fact that my writing habitat is often made unpredictable and unstable, the human agent at the root of that instability who forces a reorientation to the writing table is also the agent at the root of what saves me from complete SMGSW burnout. In this way, his influence on my writing practice is vital to my success. After all, though this analysis has thus far focused on the physical writing habitat, our relationship to that physical habitat is influenced by our mental writing habitat, our mental state being a crucial actor shaping the ecology of a writing habitat.

Angelica Duran, in her article “One *Mamá's* Dispensable Myths and Indispensable Machines,” expresses similar appreciation for her children's role in her success as an SMGSW. She writes, “Combined, graduate school and parenting create intense levels

of stress, but I learned from my kids that what I call ‘exercise’ they call ‘fun.’ Riding bikes, swimming, swinging, and such—especially when done in the company of the under-twelve crowd—created a happiness and peace that energized my other activities” (83). By engaging with her children, her mental state improved and her readiness to engage in PhD-related work increased. For Duran, the dual identities of single mother and graduate student writer, alongside her identity as a “low-income, first-generation Chicana,” positively influenced one another.

Likewise, Cunningham describes her sincere gratitude for the benefits of being a single mother to her son throughout her education from the time she was still a high-school student and found out she was pregnant. She begins her essay, “‘Mom’s School’ by Ben: An Epistemology of Falling Objects,” by describing in honest and moving detail the profound effect her earning a PhD had on shaping her son's reality, his feelings finally made clear to her through a comic he titled “Mom’s School” in which “Mom”—clearly stressed out—is yelling about her missing book and “Ben” bears the brunt of it as Mom’s school book, titled “Big Words,” falls directly on his head in the final panel. However, soon after the production of this comic, Ben leaves an acorn he is fascinated by on her desk. When she comes across it later, she is moved to see things through Ben’s eyes, providing a much-needed shift in perspective. She writes, “I stare at the acorn and I remember. I remember how beautiful it is to see the world through a child’s eyes, not just any child’s eyes, but this child’s eyes. Benjamin’s eyes. I suddenly realize I cannot remember the last time that I stopped long enough to do so, to see with him. To see him” (172). Ultimately, it is these and other lessons along the way, learning prompted by Ben, that help Cunningham keep perspective and remind her that “not all things worth learning come from books of big words” (174). Stopping to experience the world *with* our children reorients us to our own learning and work. We return to our writing reenergized and with new perspectives, and, in turn, the ecology of our writing habitats, as well as the writing itself, benefits.

The stories of these SMGSWs and their children that detail struggles and experiences similar to what I now face remind me to see the value parenthood can provide to an SMGSW. For this reason, as we continue to investigate the material reality of writers and how that reality influences their writing, let us remember to attend not only to the struggles but also to the benefits of this unique position. After all, it is not every graduate student writer who is required to spend a Saturday afternoon playing with LEGOs instead of sitting at their writing table. Personally, I wouldn’t trade the LEGO requirement for any level of an accommodating and preferable writing environment.

Ultimately, revealing these intimate scenes of writing works to push back against the notion that writers are alone in creating their writing environments. While complicating this notion feels, to me, especially important for considering the material realities of SMGSWs, it is also my hope that this article offers a helpful

framework for investigating the nuances of other unpredictable and dynamic multiagent writing habitats. I hope it helps scholars and teachers within our field consider the wide range of writing habitats students across disciplines and education levels might be working in.

ORIENTING (THOUGH NEVER FULLY) AWAY FROM THE WRITING/CRAFTING/DINING TABLE

It is 8:35 p.m. The table has been cleared (I think). Elwood is bathed, and his teeth are brushed. He has tucked himself back into his Spiderman cocoon and I lie beside him, exhausted from the day yet knowing I have a couple more hours of writing I must get done before I slip between my own sheets. From inside the sleeping bag, which has consumed his whole body, I hear, "Mommy, will you read Horton Hears a Who!?" It has recently become a bedtime reading favorite of his. I respond, "Sure, buddy." And I do. From inside his cocoon, he "reads" the lines he has memorized along with me. As expected, this read-along peters out as he gets sleepier. Finally, around the time Horton insists that the Whos of Whoville really do exist and that they can prove it to the naysaying jungle animals, Elwood falls silent except for the sound of his gentle breathing, which has deepened and slowed; I'm almost certain he has fallen asleep as I read:

*"Mr. Mayor! Mr. Mayor!" Horton called. "Mr. Mayor!
You've got to prove now that you really are there!
So call a big meeting. Get everyone out.
Make every Who holler! Make every Who shout!
Make every Who scream! If you don't, every Who
Is going to end up in a Beezle-Nut stew!"*

Though I am almost certain he is asleep, I decide to read one more page just in case. As I begin to do so, I can't help but think of all the single-mother graduate student writers—former, current, aspiring, prospective, and future: those who, despite their best efforts, never made it or never will—feeling unseen and struggling to get the writing done when and where they can amidst the insurmountable expectations and among the toys and needs and smiles and tears and preferences and calls of their children. I read quietly, slowly, so as not to wake Elwood if he has, indeed, fallen asleep. I read to him and I read to myself and I read to those women and I read to the academy:

*And, down on the dust speck, the scared little Mayor
Quick called a big meeting in Who-ville Town Square.
And his people cried loudly. They cried out in fear:
"We are here! We are here! We are here! We are here!"*

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