

# BEYOND PRODUCTIVITY

*Embodied, Situated, and (Un)Balanced  
Faculty Writing Processes*

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# THE SCHOOL BUS NEVER CAME

## *How Crisis Shapes Writing Time*

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The writing lives of women with children are often built on the assumption that, as Donald Hall writes, “time is predictable, subdividable and regular” (qtd. in Berg and Seeber 24). Many narratives of mothers who are writers—especially mothers of school-aged children—show just how fundamental predictable time is. Barbara Kingsolver, for instance, describes the school bus as a muse, in the ways that it punctuated her workdays when her children were young (Charney). For mothers of younger children, too, time away from their children is vital for professional survival. Rachel Connelly and Kristen Ghodsee write, “In terms of its role in facilitating employment, you need consistent, dependable childcare. You need childcare that is available when you need it. The best care imaginable won’t do you any good if it is only available from 9:00–11:30” (35). But what happens to women writers when the school bus stops coming, and time is no longer “predictable, subdividable and regular”? What happens to writing productivity when the days become endless and time loses all punctuation beyond the rising and the setting of the sun, and when childcare becomes not merely inconsistent or unreliable, but completely unavailable? What happens to our writerly identities when all our other identities collide into them, forced into the same space and always competing for attention?

Our relationships with time and writing shifted drastically and suddenly in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the mitigation strategies adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In order to “flatten the curve” of viral infection, schools and workplaces closed, public gatherings were prohibited, and we lived under “shelter-in-place” directives. The pandemic’s endless days involved parenting our school-aged children, housekeeping, and work, all in the same space, with the same people around all the time. There were few



meaningful hand-offs between parents because there was nowhere to go that wasn't still in our homes, and the uncertainty of the pandemic's early days meant that our kids needed us around. Writing about New York City's "shelter in place" rules and its impact on her writing, Zadie Smith describes how she had to reinvent her understanding of how her life worked now that there was nowhere to go and so much time to fill. She writes of the yearning to be alone that accompanied the early pandemic days for artists and writers, so used to unstructured and yet predictable time: "The married human, in the country place with partner and children, dreams of isolation within isolation. All the artists with children—who treasured isolation as the most precious thing they owned—find out what it is to live without privacy and without time" (Smith 29).

To work in isolation is, of course, a kind of privilege many women don't have and more lost during the pandemic. We, the authors of this essay, also acknowledge that our ability to work from home and maintain our incomes, which enabled us to protect ourselves and our families from the Coronavirus that began to spread rapidly in our New York City region in March and April 2020, was a privilege as well. But this privilege was not without its challenges, which included the daily competition for psychic space, and the drain on our physical and emotional energies from writing and parenting in a crisis, often at the same time. In order to explore our experiences of writing through COVID-19, we consider the stories and practices of other women who have written through engulfing, slow-rolling crises—war, cancer, pandemic—where the individual impacts are not always felt acutely. For us, as for other women writers, including Virginia Woolf, Mollie Panter-Downes, Nina Riggs, and Zadie Smith, the drive to keep writing remained necessary in the face of an all-consuming crisis, whether global or personal.

This essay is about our stories of finding ways to sustain our writerly identities—without fetishizing productivity—against a backdrop of anxiety, disease, and unpredictable change. As academics, we had relied upon social support structures to make our lives as writers, parents, teachers, and partners possible. The slow-rolling crisis of the pandemic meant that suddenly everyone was home all the time and so work was always around us. That is somewhat the case for writing and academic work in general, but the pandemic exacerbated the worst aspects of the "always on" nature of academic labor. Batsheva Guy and Brittany Arthur describe the feeling of constantly working because there is no distinction between "at work," "at home," "at school," et cetera; Arthur also describes the intense feelings of loneliness that were brought on by



working at home, with her very small child, alongside feeling “ashamed, embarrassed and angry” that the falling away of the structures that she had put in place to ensure her productivity, even after becoming a parent, had meant that she of course became much less “productive” (894). Productivity is very much tied to academic identity, but the pandemic has forced us to find new ways to balance our identities as parents, partners, academics, teachers, and writers.

The questions that we grappled with during the early pandemic days still confound us now, since, although the pandemic is receding, the instability and unpredictability of time remain, accompanied by pressure from our institution to get “back to normal,” even when we don’t know what normal looks like anymore. In this essay, we try to describe how we kept writing during the pandemic, and how we created structures that made it possible to sustain our writing careers alongside the other obligations of our lives. For us, managing writing in the pandemic required finding ways to integrate writing into our day-to-day pandemic routines and establishing strong support structures at home and via collaboration and writing partners, whether for relief, for accountability, for company, or to maintain momentum. We wanted to still be *seen* as writers, and this was made possible by becoming responsible to someone other than ourselves.

#### CHALLENGING ORTHODOXIES OF WRITING AND TIME

There is a vast how-to-write industry for academics (e.g., Boice; Tulley, *How*; Sword; Silvia). Many focus on managing time, exhorting faculty writers to structure their time deliberately and consistently in order to maintain and increase their productivity, with external accountability structures keeping them on track. Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, in *The Slow Professor*, write about the necessity for “timeless time” in order to be creative and produce good work: They entreat us to look to the “environmental factors [that] facilitate or interfere with creative thinking” so that we can “protect a time and place for timeless time” (28). Laura Micciche, too, states that “writing seems to require a destabilized present. Writers lose track of time; writing exerts weightlessness even as reality thumps all around” (64). Robert Boice’s research, on the other hand, shows that, to be maximally productive in terms of pages written, short, regular sessions of writing time, with check-ins from others to create accountability, are more effective than long blocks of writing time. But many of the tenets of these “how to write” orthodoxies fell apart, or had to be adapted during the pandemic, when the “consistent and



predictable childcare" that Connelly and Ghodsee place at the center of mothers' ability to do their academic work also disappeared.

Firm divisions between work and home are essential for many academic mothers to manage the demands of both job and family. Connelly and Ghodsee write that "Maryellen Giger, a professor of radiology at the University of Chicago and mother of four, suggests that we need to establish a finely tuned on/off switch, turning off home life when we're at work and vice versa. 'You have to be able to turn the switch so you can focus on where you're at'" (120). Without these divisions—these separate spaces—the experience of trying to write with children around resembles what Adrienne Rich describes in "Of Woman Born": "The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness, in his own dream-world; but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys. And I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself" (qtd. in Micciche 64). Even in noncrisis moments, the interruptions Rich describes are all too familiar to women scholars and writers. But during a pandemic, when everyone is always home, these interruptions become the norm. As Sara Ahmed notes, "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" (250). Thus, it isn't just time but also space that is essential for writing. Women need the writing table and the space to "orient" or locate themselves and their writing in relation to and away from their other responsibilities; to live, as Rich suggests, as ourselves, as *writers*.

Living on Long Island, New York (Melissa) and in central New Jersey (Heather), "shelter-in-place" started early and lasted for what seemed like endless months. We both have no local family, and even if we did, the fear of infecting others would have kept us from asking for help. (In the early days of the pandemic, so much was unknown about virus transmission that every form of contact beyond our immediate households seemed too risky.) Thankfully, our spouses, both of whom also work at local colleges, were home and we equally shared both childcare and domestic responsibilities. During school hours we each helped our children with online school while sneaking moments of work. Melissa's husband took phone calls and wrote data reports as their fourth grader independently read and took screen breaks; Melissa wrote sections of articles as her first grader completed math worksheets and colored. Heather's wife helped their second grader through four hours of



online schoolwork, while Heather shifted her own teaching online for the very first time. Heather's kindergartener watched storytellers perform fairytales and learned to type with British cartoon characters while Heather prepared and taught her classes and attended meetings. Throughout spring 2020, we authors spent hours riding bikes, watching movies, going on neighborhood walks, and doing puzzles together and when we weren't doing this, or when the children slept and our houses were quiet, we wrote. Again, we acknowledge our extreme privilege: not only did we have spouses at home but they are also equal partners in parenting our children. And yet we constantly felt our identities as writers being threatened by all these other demands on our time. Our drive to write remained, but the time we needed to write kept threatening to slip away.

Christine Tulley's analysis of the writing practices of "rhet-comp moms" gets closest to anticipating our experience of writing in the pandemic. Tulley identifies two key structures that academic mothers use and labels them "time blocks" and "time scraps." Time blocks are negotiated stretches of time where all other obligations are cleared out; time scraps are those stretches of time that mothers find at the interstices of their days. In her study, Tulley shows that research and writing mostly gets done in the "time blocks," though sometimes these time blocks might occur with family members around ("Rhet-Comp Moms"). In photos that show the process of writing her forthcoming book, *Rhet-Comp Moms*, Tulley gestures to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which she was writing her manuscript. Tulley's observation about the importance of "time blocks" for research is borne out by other studies on the pandemic's impact on academic mothers. For instance, Fulwiler and colleagues write that "Child rearing during this global pandemic has left academic mothers with even smaller units of time, which makes deep intellectual thought and writing, which are required for both publications and grants, next to impossible" (2). We quickly found that the structures we had put in place to sustain our writing lives could not withstand the realities of the pandemic; as much as we wanted to write, our drive to write alone was not enough to maintain our writing practice in the face of the new pressures the crisis created. We had to create new strategies and develop new habits in order for our identities as writers to endure. (It is worth noting that, while not the scope of this essay, extensive cross-disciplinary research has shown not only that the pandemic had a negative effect on the research productivity of academics who identify as women and who have children, but that academics who identify as men—even men with



children—experienced an increase in their rate of publications and scholarly productivity. See, for example, Squazzoni et al.; Elinas et al.; Deryugina et al.; and many more.)

In the remaining sections of this chapter, we explore two strategies that helped keep us writing during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we discuss how we made writing a part of day-to-day life via detailed scheduling of the “endless days” and how we created collaboration and accountability structures, including joint publications, writing or co-writing groups, and accountability partners in order to sustain our work practices and our writerly identities. The toll of living through a pandemic without physical or mental space to work meant that many writing goals went unmet. But since for both of us writing is a large part of our identities as academics, we needed new structures to make writing possible. To explore these strategies and structures, we offer our own narratives interwoven with narratives of the experiences of other women writing through crisis.

#### STRATEGY ONE: SCHEDULING ENDLESS DAYS

Virginia Woolf famously preached the necessity of a private room for women writers in *A Room of One's Own*. But this advocacy for a space to write is also a symbol of a woman's need for *time* to write. Woolf knew that without privacy, finding time to write—away from family and domestic responsibilities—was a near impossibility. With the outbreak of World War II, a decade after *A Room* was published, private spaces and writing time became scarce, as the chaos and destruction of war infiltrated the British domestic sphere. Woolf spent much of the war's early years in Monk House, her home in Rodmell, Sussex, writing in a private room. By all accounts, the early war years up until Woolf's death in 1941 were extremely productive ones, in part due to her domestic support systems and her own sheer determination. Yet she still describes the war, and in particular the Blitz, as an impediment to creative thought. As Woolf writes in her wartime essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” “The drone of the planes is now like the sawing of a branch overhead. Round and round it goes, sawing and sawing at a branch directly above the house. Another sound begins sawing its way into the brain” (243). Throughout the essay, war sounds interrupt her thoughts; they pierce the walls of her writing room, disrupting not only her space, but also her time to write. The war—an always looming presence—is similar to the COVID-19 pandemic in that the threat of outside danger infiltrates the home and with it the mental space of the writer. What were once writing



days are now fragmented and interrupted by the constant reminder of danger and, in our case, disease.

But Woolf, who had no children and who also had the support of domestic workers and her husband and editor, Leonard Woolf, didn't lack for a quiet place to work in quite the same way as many women during the COVID-19 pandemic and, indeed, even some of her contemporaries. For example, Mollie Panter-Downes, who wrote her "Letter from London" column about wartime Britain for *The New Yorker*, had to write with two children frequently at home. Like Woolf, Panter-Downes secluded herself in her writing room, a transformed garden hut in her Haslemere, Surrey, home. She also had domestic support, including a nanny to help with her two daughters. In a September 10, 1942, letter to her *New Yorker* editor, Panter-Downes makes clear how significant domestic workers were to her writing productivity: "Life has'nt [sic] been very encouraging for literary composition lately, as my Nannie, prop of my household, has been whisked into hospital for an operation, and I've been combining darts to town with children, cooking, and domestic chores in general! In consequence the output of ideas and results has been pretty thin, but I hope it will improve soon." The absence of her nanny due to a medical emergency means that all "domestic chores," and not just childcare, fall to Panter-Downes, effectively putting a halt to not only her writing but her very ability to come up with new "ideas" for her editors. This creative halt due to domestic support structures falling away was shared by countless women in 2020. As it did for Panter-Downes, who continued to make research trips "to town [London] with children," the disruption to creative time altered the way we approached our work. No longer privileged with reliable "blocks" of writing time, we made use of what we had, which amounted to, in Woolfian terms, "scraps, orts and fragments" (*Between the Acts* 189).

But seeing writing as integrated in our personal lives, and not separate from it, is, according to Laura Micciche, what writing looks like: "Writing cannot be bracketed from the moments and events that define us; it is part of the bundle" (72). This observation, made in the context of Micciche's discussion about how writers inhabit time, describes our reality of writing in the pandemic. Writing, if it was going to happen, had to be a part of every day, rather than something that we set aside until conditions improved, until the kids were back in school, until we felt better, less scared, less stressed. We had to make "time blocks" when we could set ourselves up for sustained writing while our families slept, and, otherwise, use the "time scraps" of the day as they became available (Tulley, "Rhet Comp Moms"). Using our time as well as we could



meant planning and always knowing what the next step in our writing was. And because of the strange unpredictability of the endless days of crisis, we couldn't wait for time to open up; writing in time scraps had to be expected, planned, squeezed in among the noise of the day if it was to become sustainable practice.

Nina Riggs's memoir of living with and dying of cancer helps explain how, in a slow-rolling crisis, whether personal or global, finding ways to live and write in the present becomes essential, rather than fixing all hopes on that moment, at some time in the future, when things go "back to normal" again. Early in the narrative of her illness, when she and her husband were both trying to understand what the cancer meant for their present and future lives, Riggs relates a conversation in which her husband referred to the time "when this is over." Riggs replies to him that living for that unknown place and time in the future "invalidates her whole life right now;" she says, instead, "I have to love these days, the same as any other" (Riggs 73). Living in the present, making each day work within the conditions set by her cancer, resembles the work of mothering and writing during the pandemic. Writing was how to make the days mean something for us as they happened, rather than just waiting for it all to be over. Writing and mothering, unlike so much else in those endless days, were "pitched towards futurity" in ways that many other of our activities were not: even as we inhabited a continuous present, the kids still needed new shoes, needed haircuts, and the writing was there to "endure, withstand and return to" (Micciche 84). It has only been recently that it's felt possible to imagine a future that looks different from the hundreds of days that have gone before and to thus shape our writing days differently.

Throughout most of her illness, Riggs wrote about her cancer: first on her blog, "Suspicious Country," and then through *The Bright Hour*. Her *New York Times* article, published on September 23, 2016, came out when her cancer was quite advanced; she completed the manuscript of her memoir two months later, and died in February 2017. She describes her project—not just for writing, but for her life—as one of "accepting absurdity and the beauty of the everyday when there isn't really a future you can count on" ("Nina Riggs" 2:03–2:12). Riggs had to make her writing a part of her days because, she writes, "it is clear there will not be enough days" (288). In her only interview about the book before her death, Riggs told Nora Krug that "in fact, I had a hard time *not* working on the manuscript, and occasionally had to be reminded to take breaks, pace myself a little" (Krug). Even in a memoir in which Riggs is so committed to being in each day with her family, she is com- mitted to



write. Our exigencies are different from Riggs's, but the lack of a reliable future is similar, as is the strong drive to write even during—or perhaps even because of—crisis.

For both of us, the pandemic changed time and writing. For Heather, writing was the only thing that could take her outside the house, give her something “else” to do, something to imagine the future when the present was so uncertain. Writing was something to get up early for, to create structures for, something that connected her with her professional self. She wrote where and when she could—in the interstices of the day and in blocks of time claimed from her family via the online calendar invitations that she and her wife would send to each other—and, when she would disappear, as far as she was able. Supervising online school in spring 2020 and for ten weeks during the worst weeks of the pandemic in the winter of 2020–2021, the blocks felt luxurious but were never enough. And so, scraps of time grabbed early in the morning, or between monitoring online first and third grade, were when the writing had to happen.

In the spring and summer of 2020, Melissa could still manage to find chunks of time in which to write. She scheduled her writing times around virtual school and virtual camps and worked on different projects during different blocks of time that were available to her. She usually worked on two to three writing projects simultaneously, which kept her interested and motivated in the work and kept her from getting too stuck on one project. In the fall, however, things in New York began to open up. Teaching and administrative labor, although still online, became more demanding; her children returned to school, at first in a hybrid format and then fully in person. But everything still felt more difficult because while the state touted “back to normal,” life was anything but. We could go places, but separation was still advised. Activities restarted but with extra requirements for caregivers to observe and fulfill. The blocks of time Melissa was able to schedule before became scraps. She was no longer able to work on multiple writing projects but could manage to plod through one at a time in the moments that weren't taken up by work and family responsibilities. Part of the shift from block scheduling to scrap scheduling was due to a decline in her own mental bandwidth. The struggles of maintaining a productive work schedule over the spring and summer had taken a tremendous toll and the quick push to “back to normal” put work and family schedules into chaos. Writing in sporadic scraps in the morning and at night and while waiting in the car became the best she could manage. But yet, through the scraps, the writing continued to happen, and this was in large part due to collaboration in its many forms.



## STRATEGY TWO: CREATING COMMUNITY IN ISOLATION

The benefits of academics writing with others have been well-touted in many books. In *Acknowledging Writing Partners*, for example, Laura Micciche explores the ways in which writers recognize those with whom they write, whether they “simply” share space with them or work in active collaboration. Following Frank Martela’s work, Berg and Seeber suggest that collaborative work creates a “holding environment,” which functions as a kind of “supportive net” for those who participate in it, offering “gestures of care and protection . . . it offers the promise that ideas will be preserved and nurtured rather than dismissed” (86). And Helen Sword, in *Air and Light and Time and Space*, interviews several academic writers about their collaborative writing practice, describing the ways in which it provides not only intellectual stimulation and broadens the scope of possibilities of their writing, but also offers emotional support. As Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford write, “Collaborative writing has the ‘capacity . . . to open out, to open up, to explore not only the experiential present but the theoretically possible’” (141). Many of the writers in these collections talk about writing with others by sharing physical space, either on joint or separate projects; or of the freedom of the “hand-off,” where each works on a piece, and then hands it off to another, working in a different place or even time zone, reassured by the fact that the work is moving forward, even if it is out of their hands.

There is, though, little discussion of collaborative writing in historical times of crisis. In her descriptions of the process of writing her memoir, it is clear that for Riggs the writing of her illness had to be a solitary effort, even as she explores her relationships with her husband, children, friends, and parents in the text. The crisis of war and pandemic, by contrast, is a collective crisis, where lines between individual experience and public need become blurry and individual choices are scrutinized for their impact on the war effort and the common good. Navigating this collectivity means that much of Virginia Woolf’s and Mollie Panter-Downes’s management of writing during World War II involved finding places to be alone and making sure there was someone else to take care of the day-to-day household duties so that they could write.

However, finding isolation amid parenting and housekeeping, teaching and writing, all in the same shared space, is an entirely different proposition. For us, during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of collaboration’s main values has been the way it reasserts connection with a world outside the particular versions of the pandemic that we are enduring. This experience seems to be a common one: collaboration—writing groups, accountability partners, and co-writing—has been a popular



coping mechanism specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this popularity in crisis seems new. The prodigious amount of writing on the pandemic's impact on academic work practices (for example, Mar Pereira and citations therein) speaks to its singularity: there is no experience, in the last hundred years, to which we can compare it.

Scholars of the 1918–19 influenza pandemic have remarked upon the ways in which we are still coming to understand the impact of that pandemic on the day-to-day life of its “guilt-stricken survivors” (Outka 940). Most of the few near-contemporary narratives that are extant concern the individual experience of illness, even though, as Thomas Ewing writes, “it is also important . . . to recognize that survival was also part of the experience of the epidemic” (Nichols et al. 651). Just like during the COVID-19 pandemic, participating in the public health strategies developed in the 1918–19 pandemic—closures of schools, strict limits on movements and gatherings—created a scene of survival that requires isolation. However, in 1918–19, isolation was not mitigated by virtual connection: collaboration without sharing physical documents would have been expensive (phone bills and postage) or impossible. The point is that there is no precedent of this collaborative response to crisis for women writers. Panter-Downes and Woolf both sought solitude and built spaces where they could write alone. Riggs found that she couldn't write alone even when she had the opportunity to do so: she needed to be with her family as she wrote about her experiences with cancer. Riggs's narrative gets somewhat closer to our experiences, although we had no choice as we had nowhere else to go. And so, the pandemic has, for us, reinforced how important creating structures for writing that reach outside our domestic spaces are, not only for productivity, but for the sustainability both of our writing projects and our identities as writers.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Tulley suggested collaborative work as a way through, exhorting her readers to “reach out” to colleagues and see if they can create faculty writing groups, suggesting that these “moves help connect us, even if we are not on our campuses and at conferences to discuss research” (“Resetting”). Joint projects, online co-writing (shared, regularly scheduled in an online space in which to write), and working with accountability partners became more important for us and for many other women academics writing during the pandemic. These joint or group writing spaces and projects created structures in the endless days that held us accountable to someone who saw us as more than a domestic partner, parent, or teacher. Distributing the energy and labor needed for writing made writing more possible.



But this distribution too required adaptation: older models of two writers sitting with two pads of paper and two pens, or even two computers in the same room banging out text, simply could not happen.

Seeking feedback from fellow writers and editors has always been part of an author's process. But the extreme isolation and mental toll of living through a pandemic with families always at home led us to seek new opportunities and ways to collaborate with others. Melissa, for example, formed an accountability/writing partnership with a research colleague on the other side of the country. The two spoke weekly to discuss writing goals, share drafts, and offer feedback. Some weeks these calls would serve as support check-ins, with conversations turning to pandemic fears, family stresses, and general wellness. This partnership became as important to Melissa's writing productivity as it was to her mental well-being. Heather maintained a weekly, two-hour virtual co-writing session with two work colleagues; this became not only a predictable, protected time for writing, but also provided connection with the world of our college from which she had been severed. These co-writing sessions provided a different kind of accountability than the one Melissa describes, but the effects were similar: being expected to appear on a screen once a week and needing to be in the midst of a writing project on which she could work for two hours reoriented Heather to the future amid the continuous present of pandemic time. For both of us, the accountability and collaborations kept us connected to our professional lives as writers and scholars.

A sister-alternative to the accountability partner is the writing group, which many of Melissa's and Heather's friends and scholarly colleagues formed during the pandemic. The goal of the writing group is in part accountability, but it may not always include the discussion of goals and personal support as can be offered in a partnership (although it certainly can). Writing groups often require participants to produce a certain number of pages on a specific schedule. During the pandemic, this kept people writing and reading. But more importantly, as with accountability partners, it helped us feel less alone in our work and personal lives and hang on to our identities as writers.

The last form of collaboration that we wish to touch on, and one that this essay illustrates, is joint publication. While not new to the scientific disciplines, collaborative publishing is somewhat uncommon in the humanities, and specifically within English literature, in which Melissa works. Heather, by contrast, working in applied linguistics and writing studies, has collaborated with several co-authors throughout her career using different strategies for collaboration with her various writing



partners. Shortly before the pandemic, we decided to form a writing partnership, which was strengthened during the crisis. Not only did this enable us to continue to supplement our individual scholarship but it also allowed each of us to venture into other areas of research that were new to us, thus broadening our research area expertise. And, frankly, it was a deeply enjoyable and satisfying experience in a time when many things were not very enjoyable or satisfying. The unique scheduling demands of writing together allowed for each of us to take turns writing and editing, which meant that even when one of us was taking a break from the essay, it was still moving forward in the other's hands. This form of collaboration is not new: Cindy Selfe, interviewed in Tulley's "How Writing Faculty Write," describes the pleasure of the hand-off to her regular collaborative writing partner, Gail Hawisher: "I totally give it over. I don't care if they change every single one of my blessed words as long as they're doing something and moving the piece forward. . . . I just assume [Gail] is constantly making the piece better when it's out of my hands" (37). The possibility of surrendering a piece into another pair of trusted hands during a time when there was only one other adult to hand off domestic and childcare responsibilities provided deep relief during the pandemic days.

Like Selfe's and Hawisher's partnership, collaboration for us was not contemporaneous. Instead, we handed off shared documents from late at night to early in the morning; we popped in for short intervals of time during our days and texted or called each other about what we had done. Most of our conversation about writing happened in the writing itself, in comments and text messages. We rarely tracked our changes, neither monitoring nor approving each other's contributions to the piece; since neither of us has much time, we must trust what each other has done rather than combing through each other's changes. Our pandemic collaborations have been such that we have merged our voices in the pieces that we write, and we have taken responsibility for individual sections while being each other's editors, critics, and accountability partners for the texts that we are writing together. The endless days have facilitated this kind of daily back and forth. Our collaborations have created structures for writing that have threaded our time scraps together.

### EMERGING FROM CRISIS

As we write this essay, the United States is emerging, haltingly, from the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Case counts are well down from their January 2021 peaks; a majority of adults are vaccinated with highly



effective vaccines, and our workplaces are opening up. Now, our questions and concerns revolve around what our future writing practice will look like as we reintegrate working on-site with our domestic lives. Thus, as a conclusion to this essay, we articulate some of our questions for ourselves about how the relationship between writing and time might change for us in the future. As mothers of growing children, we know that the ways in which we write will continue to evolve as our children's needs change and as we progress in our careers. Melissa goes up for tenure in 2022; her tenure decision may well, again, shift her relationship to writing and time. Heather, promoted to full professor in August 2020, is establishing a new rhythm and reason for writing that is disconnected from institutional metrics.

So what are the changes to our writing practices, brought on by the pandemic, that we hope to sustain as we go "back to normal"? (We note that we always write this in quotation marks, because we really don't know what this is or, indeed, if we even want it.) We had initiated our first collaborative writing project in October 2019, but at that time we didn't really know what style of collaboration would suit us or, indeed, if it would even work. As we found during the pandemic, our working rhythms and paces are very compatible, so we will continue writing with each other in the ways that we describe above and also talk to each other about other writing projects, filling out for each other the picture of who we are as writers as well as affirming each other's writerly identities. We will also continue to foster accountability partnerships and groups, which allow us to imagine our writing futures even when the present moment isn't conducive to writing.

Pandemics have a way of fracturing narrative. Writing of the impact of the trauma of the 1918–19 influenza pandemic, Catherine Belling observes that "the silence that surrounds the 1918 pandemic may not only have been due to selective memory's normal erasure. There may also have been a refusal or inability to describe a trauma that might still have haunted its survivors. Perhaps the flu overwhelmed language in ways that war did not" (57). As we wrote this piece, we noted that the stories of our individual lives and our struggles to shape pandemic time so we could write seemed banal in the face of the massive trauma the world has experienced. So perhaps that is the conclusion of this piece: we have tried to offer descriptions of the shape of our days even as we are still trying to shape them in such a way that we get through these late pandemic months. It has felt, at times, that language is overwhelmed by this pandemic, and that the only stories we can even try to make sense of are the smallest ones. Thus, we offer a fractured account of our



pandemic writing lives: we woke up early in the morning, stayed up late at night, and tried to find time that is ours in the midst of the relentless claims upon it within a space—our homes—where too many parts of our lives have happened.

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