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Dependency and Obligation: Reading COVID-19 through a Feminist Lens

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it not only a deadly virus that has spread rapidly across the globe, causing a global pause, but also a mirror that made persisting inequalities in society visible on a greater scale. The virus has exposed a set of social, racial, gender, and economic inequalities, specifically in the US-American context. Besides the media coverage of case and death numbers, economic shut-downs, and the prospects of vaccinations, the precarious situations of many were made public. It is the aim of this paper to investigate a specific collection of female narratives from *The 19th News* that described the severe social and economic consequences of the pandemic on women across the United States. By applying Judith Butler's (2020) notion of nonviolence in combination with social reproduction feminist theory, the concepts of vulnerability, dependency, and obligations will be in the center of the analysis. Furthermore, the paper aims to investigate the intersections present in the female narratives and, hence, to demonstrate their relationality and interdependency by providing a critique of neoliberalism.

Key words: COVID-19, nonviolence, social reproduction feminism, vulnerability, dependency

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit at the beginning of 2020, the daily lives of numerous people around the globe changed from one day to the next. The public sphere became the danger zone where a Nano virus was (and still is) invisibly taking over and forcing everyone to retreat to their houses.

The romanticizing of this unexpected social and public interruption at the beginning was soon disrupted not only by the danger of the rising number of COVID-19 cases, but also by the new challenges of working and studying remotely and by additional care-taking duties. These new circumstances affected society disproportionally, and once again, inequities were made transparent along the lines of race, class, and gender. Rising female unemployment, additional care-taking duties, rising domestic violence, and greater exposure to the virus due to occupations in the health sector and in so-called "essential jobs" are visible outcomes for women around the globe (United Nations 2–3).

Past pandemics, such as those of the Ebola and Zika viruses, have already demonstrated how their consequences disproportionately affected the most vulnerable of society globally, specifically women. Both pandemics affected first and foremost women's health due to the high infection rate and the danger for women, particularly pregnant women. The lack of prevention measurement and the inadequate actions throughout those pandemics put women in Africa and their unborn children at particular risk, as the study of Bennett and Davies (2016) revealed. Additionally, women in Africa also suffered enormously in terms of their socio-economic situation where jobs were lost, and as a result, livelihoods were threatened. Although a report by the United Nations et al. entitled *Recovering from the Ebola Crisis* was published in 2015, Bennett and Davies have pointed out that hardly any work has been conducted on the effects of gender inequality on women's livelihoods in the Zika and Ebola pandemics and urged in their work that more research examining the effects of gendered inequality of public health emergencies needs to be conducted. This lack of adequate research and policy recommendations to implement sustainable policies and political responses was demonstrated once again by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bandiera et al. 3).

To shed light on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women

around the globe, a variety of media outlets as well as social media platforms have mediated female narratives to highlight the severe consequences of the pandemic on gender equality and to display the complex nature of the female experience in current capitalist structures. Notions of vulnerability, dependency, and obligations with regard to structural conditions and societal perceptions were uncovered by presenting a diverse collection of female voices around the globe and particularly in the United States, which will be the focus of this article. *The 19th News*, a non-profit US-American nonpartisan newsroom reporting on gender, politics, and policies, published throughout 2020 on the consequences of the pandemic for women in the United States. One article from August 2, 2020, titled "America's First Female Recession," highlights the specific consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on women living in the United States. Chabeli Carrazana featured four personal stories of women from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds living in the United States in her analysis of the economic and social consequences the pandemic had on their livelihoods and on US-American women in general. As this news outlet provides a space for female narratives to raise awareness and contribute to the political discourse, the article by Carrazana functions as the primary source in this paper.

In the spirit of the feminist notion that "the personal is political" it is the aim of this paper to examine the personal stories and to critically engage with the questions of dependency and obligation by drawing extensively on Judith Butler's understanding of vulnerability and her concept of nonviolence in combination with approaches of social reproduction feminism. By using these narratives to exemplify how the pandemic has made transparent the social, racial, and economic inequalities in the United States, the purpose is, however, neither to generalize the US-American female experience in the pandemic, nor to use the narratives as the ultimate truths for the livelihoods of their respective female identities with all their intersections, but rather to provide a space in which to value and investigate these female narratives in all their contradictions and commonalities. Consequently, this will allow us to

interpret them as mosaic pieces of a complex and ambivalent grand narrative of women living in the United States which needs to be deconstructed and analyzed to reveal the existing similarities and differences. Guided by Butlerian thought and social reproduction theory, this paper's objective focuses on investigating the intersections that the individual female narratives represent and, thus, on demonstrating their relationality and interdependency by providing a critique of neoliberalism.

Four Women and the Pandemic

The article features four different women living in the United States during the pandemic and experiencing its effect on various levels and to different degrees. It begins by describing situation of Ellu Nasser, a 42-year-old consultant who was bound to work remotely from home and to take care of her two sons, while her husband was on the frontline fighting the virus as a doctor. Her narrative vividly describes the constraints the pandemic put on her: "'If you come in, I will lose my job,' she told her 6-year-old in desperation, trying to keep him away. Her husband was the hero. He was saving lives. She was the terrible mom – 'the worst mom ever,' her sons told her – and the terrible worker" (Carrazana). Since her husband could not cut his hours, she was the one to take over the caring responsibilities despite her own career chances. As a white, privileged woman and due to her husband's financial stability, Nasser was able to quit her job after three months of trying to juggle all of her new duties, including home schooling, working remotely, and household chores. She took up the unpaid work at home for the sake of their children and her own mental health.

Nasser's story is followed by the account of Cristina Augirre Sevillano, a 50-year-old Cuban immigrant in the United States who previously worked as a housekeeper at a resort in Florida. After the pandemic spread across the States, Augirre Sevillano lost her job due to the closure of the resort and with it her health insurance, as well as the decent pay she was earning after years

of working there. Disadvantaged by her lack of English skills and her limited economic resources, Augirre Sevillano was forced to take on a job as a fruit packer in a highly precarious situation. In her new job, she had no health insurance and experienced a great lack of safety measures, which quickly exposed her to the virus and made her severely sick without health coverage. In addition to her own hardship, her daughter, who was living with her at the time, lost her job, as well, due to the country's shutdown. Suddenly, both women were out of work and facing economic as well as health risks. Eventually, Augirre Sevillano recovered from the virus, but states in the interview that "this has been the worst year we've had to endure" (Carrazana).

Augirre Sevillano's story is followed by an investigation of changes to the childcare situation caused by the pandemic and describes the experience of the owner of a childcare facility. Diana Niermann, CEO of *Kozy Kids Enrichment Center*, had to shut down the center in mid-March 2020 but, with government support and investments into safety measures, was able to reopen in June 2020. Niermann describes how only 17 out of the 92 children returned and most of her staff had already found jobs elsewhere or left the sector altogether due to the unpredictable future. Reminiscing not only on pre-COVID-19 times, Niermann also deliberately points out the low pay of child-care workers ("Child care doesn't pay very much. We need to switch that" [Carrazana]). Child-care facilities are essential components of today's capitalist societies as they are major contributors to the economy by providing space and care for children, so that their parents can contribute their work to the market, yet still as part of social reproduction, payment and appreciation are lower than for work towards economic production, which Niermann indicates in her remarks.

The final story in the article features Mara Geronemus, who opened her own law business doing work remotely for clients across the United States. Supported by her husband, she was not only her own boss but was also deeply involved in networking with other working moms and functioned

as chair of the board of her children's private Jewish faith school. As the pandemic hit the country, she experienced a slow "collapse of the card house," as she describes it. She was forced to cut her hours in order to manage the additional child-care duties and support for her children's schoolwork. In her rather privileged position, Geronemus had the option to make the economic sacrifices for the sake of her family and her mental health, but still asks the rhetorical question at the end of the interview: "Can you have it all?" (Carrazana).

The four narratives in the article are examples selected to emphasize what the title already indicates – *America's first female recession*. Carrazana presents these personal stories to mediate the complexities of female experiences by presenting different livelihoods. Although she was certainly not able to present the whole spectrum of women's experiences by featuring more privileged white women in the article, the message is nevertheless significant. At first sight, these narratives might come across as individual livelihoods, some more fortunate than others, but upon closer examination, their interrelation and interdependency become visible. As examples of constructed cultural perceptions, these women, due to the pandemic, faced structural disadvantages that made transparent the social, economic, and racial inequalities present in capitalist societies. Furthermore, the scale of the health crisis underlined the importance of examining the interrelation between social reproduction and production that exists in capitalist societies – in this case, in the United States. To do so, the following analysis investigates the notions of vulnerability, dependency, and obligation, as well as the obligation of care, and the question of grievability and the urge for equity as presented in the four narratives in *The 19th News*.

Vulnerability

It is argued in this paper that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed particular vulnerable groups to severe dangers and consequences, and therefore, the notion of vulnerability and the classification of vulnerable groups

needs to be briefly examined. Couser (2004) highlights in his discussion of vulnerability and, particularly in his mediation of "vulnerable subjects," the relational aspects of the concepts. According to him, the conditions that declare subjects vulnerable include extreme youth or age, physical or mental illness and impairments, and belonging to culturally or socially disadvantaged groups (xii). All these conditions are perceived in relation to heteronormative matrixes of capitalist systems which then classify persons as old or young, physically or mentally ill or impaired, and defines who belongs to a culturally or socially disadvantaged group.

The relationality that is present in Couser's understanding of vulnerability can also be found in Butler's (2016, 2020) discussions of the concept. Yet Butler (2016) proposes a more complex and ambivalent understanding of vulnerability and expands the perception of vulnerability to all beings to various degrees. She argues that, as much as the concept can be affirmed to have an existential condition due to the fact that everyone is subject to accidents, illness, and attacks that can make one quickly vulnerable, vulnerability is also "a socially induced condition," which is responsible for the disproportionate exposure to suffering, specifically for those whose access to food, medical care, and shelter is often precluded ("Vulnerability" 24). Thus, Butler argues concretely that "vulnerability emerges as part of social relations" and makes two general claims regarding this assumption. Firstly, "vulnerability ought to be understood as relational and social," and secondly, vulnerability appears "in the context of specific social and historical relations" ("Vulnerability" 4).

Furthermore, it is significant to point out that, by defining one group as vulnerable and to render the group's members as "vulnerable subjects," a binary is constructed which hence indicates that there are other, invulnerable groups. The vulnerable group also receives the status that forces them to claim protection. Since the developed binary is complex, the responsibility to take protection is ambivalent and poses problems. Thus, this construct not only encourages binary thinking but also creates the perception that groups

are already constituted as invulnerable or vulnerable. With this construction, a hierarchy between the paternalistically powerful and the vulnerable is created (Butler, *Nonviolence* 71). As Butler clarifies, "it is, of course, possible to claim that such a distinction is descriptively true, but when it becomes the basis of a moral reflection, then a social hierarchy is given a moral rationalization, and moral reasoning is pitted against the aspirational norm of a shared or reciprocal condition of equality" (ibid.).

Thus, it is inevitable to acknowledge that the danger of such vulnerability politics lurks in "fortifying hierarchies that most urgently need to be dismantled" (Butler, *Nonviolence* 72). Therefore, Butler's observation as well as Couser's clarification leave one with the necessity to highlight the hierarchal nature of the concept of vulnerability. However, this acknowledgment must not be viewed as opposing the importance of its nestling in human rights and ethical care questions, particularly for feminist thought, but rather as an act of emphasizing and problematizing the ambivalent nature of the construct of vulnerability (Butler, *Nonviolence* 72).

Important in the context of this paper is the emphasis on relationality as part of vulnerability. One is never solely vulnerable but rather vulnerable to a person, a social structure or a situation because of the reliability on them and the interrelation created thereof. In terms of the pandemic, the presented female narratives embody this vulnerability and confirm Butler's argument that "one is vulnerable to the social structure upon which one depends, so if the structure fails, one is exposed to a precarious condition" (*Nonviolence* 46). All four women have experienced this exposure during the months of the pandemic. Due to school closures, working place restrictions, and general shutdowns of caring facilities and other centers, social structures were disrupted and the women's vulnerability was made transparent and had a significant impact on their lives on various levels given their different livelihoods, yet their commonalities can be found in the vulnerability that was revealed.

One of the female interviewees describes the situation as the "collapse of the card house" (Carrazana), which metaphorically describes how the pandemic has demolished her private and professional life. It also indicates on a broader scale the disclosure of structural deficiencies with its inequalities across lines of race, class, and gender in neoliberal systems. The metaphor accurately expresses how the "house," however, was already constructed to fall, with its shaky arrangement and precarious foundation made of cards. The slightest interruption can cause a house of cards to collapse, and therefore, it is far from a secure rescue space. Using this metaphor for the experience of the pandemic, the narrator indicates how her situation (and that of many others) was doomed to crumble with the smallest interruption and thus points to the systemic flaws of the current capitalist system that quickly renders one vulnerable and reveals the importance of systemic changes. As Butler points out, one "depends on someone, something or some condition in order to live" (*Nonviolence* 46); however, when this condition disappears, one is "vulnerable to being dispossessed, abandoned, or exposed in ways that may well prove unlivable" (ibid.). The "collapse of the card house" has caused the women's lives to be proven unlivable to different degrees.

Dependency and Obligation

What this global pandemic has also shown in the most forceful way is that, as Butler argues, "no one is born an individual . . . we are all regardless of our political viewpoints in the present, born into a condition of radical dependency" (*Nonviolence* 40–41). The virus breaks up the notion of individuality, an occurrence which was long overdue and exposes us to the reality of the interdependence of life. Individual actions have always had tremendous effects on others, yet this particular global pandemic demonstrates in its deadliest way how the individual is actually vitally linked to the collective. This interconnectivity, furthermore, highlights "global vulnerability" (Butler, "COVID"). Certain groups are more vulnerable than others; this fact constructs the current crisis of capital, caste, and the planet which this pandemic

has made transparent (Butler "COVID").

Individualism is a social construct, and, as Butler has argued, "no one actually stands on one's own; strictly speaking, no one feeds oneself" (*Nonviolence* 41). As Disabilities Studies have shown, pavement is inevitable for one to move along the street and thus expresses the interconnectivity not only of humans with each other and with non-humans, but also the dependency understood as a reliance on material and social structures, as well as the environment that enhances the possibility of life (Anderberg 189). Thus, the construction of liberal individualism neglects the acknowledgement of materialistic and structural circumstances that are necessary to confirm the notion of individualism and hence subvert the entire concept. Butler again shows the ambivalence of the individualistic idea by demonstrating the dependency that is inherent in everyone's life (*Nonviolence* 42).

Linking Butler's understanding of dependency to the global pandemic and the women's stories, it is evident that all four women were relying on certain structures and systems in place which were essential for their lives to operate as they did. However, the degree of this dependency on certain structures is also closely linked to their social class. The first and last women, for instance, were able to afford child-care facilities and so relied heavily on them to advance their own careers as both parents worked full time outside of the home. Their financial means, then, also made it possible for the women to reduce their hours and finally stop their paid work altogether when the pandemic was at full swing due to their husband's financial stability through their jobs as doctors. Although the pandemic made both women rely heavily on their husbands' financial support and forced them to step back from their personal careers, the decision was economically possible for them. Nevertheless, the consequences left their marks on the women, as their identities are heavily defined by their professions.

After quitting her job, Nasser states that "for exactly one day, the relief was overwhelming. Then, worry" and highlights thus how her personal choice put her on an emotional rollercoaster that was directed by economic privilege on the one hand, and personal aspiration on the other, which she sums up in the following remarks: "I kept wondering, 'How long will the personal choices I made around COVID-19 hurt me permanently? . . . I would like to be working for 25 more years. That's joy for me. My work is not separate from who I am as a person. It's a simultaneous feeling of guilt that we are able to do it . . . and sadness that this is the situation we were in" (Carrazana). This statement demonstrates that Nasser views her profession outside of the home as a significant part of her identity, whereas her role, and now her new main occupation, as the caregiver of her children, is not mentioned as a vital part of her being. Thus, Nasser makes the prominent capitalist distinction between social reproduction and economic production.

Social reproduction is understood as biological reproduction (e.g., pregnancy, breastfeeding), the reproduction of the labor force (e.g., unpaid household work, caring tasks), and the performance of paid caring labor (e.g., paid domestic workers) (Teeple Hopkins 131). Economic production, on the other hand, is understood as paid labor outside of the home. Fraser (2017) has eloquently described that not only has the work of social reproduction been separated from that of economic production since at least the industrial era, but the former has also been associated with women and the latter with men remunerating "'reproductive' activities in the coin of 'love' and 'virtue', while compensating 'productive work' in that of money" (23). And by doing so, an institutional basis for modern forms of women's subordination was created by capitalist societies. This separation further led to the importance and value of social reproduction being obscured as it was associated with women. Ironically, official economies are dependent on the very same process of social reproduction whose value is being rejected (Fraser 23–24). By stressing how her paid work is an essential part of her identity, Nasser emphasizes the importance of production in capitalist societies on individual livelihoods,

particularly those of the middle and upper social classes.

Similar to Nasser's narrative is the story of Mara Geronemus, who reminisces in the interview about how to move on with the pandemic when her daughter had over 200 unfinished school assignments at the end of the year and her husband is not likely to give up his career: "My husband is not quitting his job, he's not leaving the hospital. My kids are not dropping out of school. So, what gives? Probably my work" (Carrazana). However, unlike Nasser's statement, Geronemus does not stress explicitly how her profession constitutes part of her identity, but rather indicates that her profession is seen as being at the end of the family's list of priorities and that she views only paid work outside of the home as work. The hierarchy described in Geronemus's story presents a contradictory image where her work outside of the home is viewed as the least important within her kinship structures, yet her work as a caretaker inside the home is devalued and represented as the final resort for her caused by the pandemic. By not defining care and household work as work, the narrative recalls the popular capitalist notion that only paid work is defined as real work without realizing that, without social reproduction, current capitalist structures would not be maintained. To problematize this popular assumption, social reproduction feminist scholars have directed attention "to the interaction between unpaid and paid labor, positioning these as different-but-equally-essential parts of the same overall (capitalist) system" (Ferguson 3).

When now contrasting the above-mentioned two stories with the second woman in the article and her dependency on certain structures, the significant differences between the women's narratives are omnipresent. Previous to the pandemic, Augirre Sevillano, as a housekeeper, already occupied the social reproduction sector by doing paid housework, and thus her work was already less valued in capitalist society. She also relied on her economic rewards and health-care coverage provided by her job. During the pandemic, she experienced a great loss of these when the hotel had to close. Losing

health insurance, however, was not an issue for the other women due to their economic stabilities. Dependence on job-related social benefits was particularly precarious during the pandemic and forced numerous workers in the United States to relocate on the labor market, often taking on less protected jobs (Matilla-Santander et al. 226), as seen in Augirre Sevillano's story as well. Due to her economic instability, she was forced to work as a fruit packer and was quickly exposed to the virus without health insurance. As the stories described earlier illustrate the women's financial dependence on their husbands due to their own withdrawal from the paid labor market, Augirre Sevillano's story demonstrates how the pandemic has affected citizens significantly differently across class lines.

The fourth narrative in the article brings in an interesting angle to the discussion of dependency. As a child-care facility owner, Niermann was usually in charge of providing structures and care facilities upon which society relied. As the pandemic forced her to close her facility, not only was she put under economic stress, but many of her workers left, as well, due to the already fraught situation in their field. Yet, with her financial means, Niermann was able to overcome the struggle and opened up her facility as soon as it was secure enough. Thus, similar to other women presented in the article, Niermann's social class and financial means enabled her to overcome this sudden crisis with comparably little damage; whereas Aguirre Sevillano's story describes how the pandemic has left her in a more precarious situation than before as she could not rely on any financial resources due to her previous insecurity.

The complexity of dependency caused by the pandemic is apparent, and the analysis of the four narratives has revealed this in its multidimensions. Yet, not only were the women individually dependent on certain structures, but the pandemic also unmasked how capitalist structures overall are dependent on social reproduction, which is predominantly unpaid and carried out by women. Women in general have always done the majority (75%)

of the world's unpaid domestic and care work, which is a significant component of the success of capitalism (Ferguson 9). When the pandemic spread across the globe, women were once again targeted to make up for the lack of care facilities, and thus their share of unpaid social production increased in order to support the economy. The interdependency of social reproduction and economic reproduction as a key component for the persistence of capitalist structures and their inherent inequalities were unmasked by the pandemic. The problematization of this interdependency is crucial to understanding how current capitalist systems are operating and how inequalities can be combated by challenging neoliberalism.

As a critique to the rise of neoliberalism, Butler raised the question of a "global obligation" even before the pandemic spread around the globe. Her suggestion is built on serving all the inhabitants of the world – animals and humans alike – and is therefore "about as far from the neoliberal consecration of individualism as it could be" (*Nonviolence* 44). This discussion has regularly been dismissed as naïve, but with the shifting global dynamics caused by the virus, the notion has gained importance again. Since the pandemic has exposed "a global vulnerability" (Butler, "COVID"), the urge for social solidarity has become apparent. Furthermore, Butler's "counter-fantasy" (*Nonviolence* 42) aims at highlighting the interdependency of global systems, which the pandemic has made even more clear. Thus, global obligation is necessary to value this interdependency in order to create more just systems for all. Butler argues that "only by avowing this interdependency does it become possible to formulate global obligations" (*Nonviolence* 46) and hence demonstrates the inevitable connection between the two notions. Furthermore, global obligation should be demanded from all oppressive and unjust dynamics and systems:

> including obligations towards migrants; toward the Roma; those who live in precarious situations, or indeed, those who are subject to occupation and war; those who are subject to institutional and systemic racism; the indige-

> nous whose murder and disappearance never surface fully in the public record; women who are subject to domestic and public violence, and harassment in the workplace; and gender nonconforming people who are exposed to bodily harm, including incarceration and death. (44)

Butler's detailed discussion of obligations is significant for the understanding of the pandemic's effects on society which have disproportionately affected people across lines of race, class, and gender. Social, racial, gendered, and economic inequities have been made transparent and thus expose the need to conform to Butler's suggestion of global obligations to avoid similar drastic scenarios in the future. Furthermore, the above-mentioned female narratives stress Butler's demand as well. Their individual livelihoods reflect Butler's observation and thus emphasize the ambivalence of individuality while supporting Butler's challenging of the notion. As the narratives have also demonstrated, a need for change is inevitable in order to avoid yet another crisis that disadvantages the most vulnerable and creates more vulnerability. Therefore, Butler suggests that a "new idea of equality can only emerge from a more fully imagined interdependency, an imagining that unfolds in practices and institutions, in new forms of civic and political life" (*Nonviolence* 44).

Obligations of Care

The notions of dependency and obligation also raise the question of care, which was omnipresent in the women's stories, but also in the pandemic in general. From the beginning of the pandemic, the question of caring duties was mediated in public discourse (e.g., news coverage, documentaries, podcasts, blogs). Caring paradigms were shifting due to the influence of the health threats. Nasser's and Gorenemus's accounts highlight the shift in caring duties, as well. Both women were expected to take care of their children at home, assisting them with their schoolwork, while simultaneously maintaining their personal professions. Their partners, on the other hand, were not expected to step in and fill this gap, but rather continued their professions

outside of the home and so the situation left the two women with no other choice but to cut their hours for the sake of their families and their personal health, as the extra caring duties put constraints on their mental health. Gorenemus describes how she stayed up all night to finish her work after she had taken care of her children and their schoolwork all day and how she cannot imagine continuing this cycle for much longer: "I haven't pulled all nighters since law school. . . . We can't spend another school year or another month doing things the way we did it between March and June" (Carrazana).

The pandemic has stimulated the discourse around the issue of care and thus pointed out its flaws in the perceptions and obligations of care that were previously considered to be a normative assumption in society. Suddenly, care-taking facilities were shut down, grandparents were advised to reject spending time with their grandchildren for safety measures, and younger people were advised to take over every day errands for older generations in order to prevent them from being exposed to the virus in the public sphere. These sudden dynamics and changes have tremendously disrupted the current systems of care and brought inequalities and particular normative gender perception to the forefront. Women, who globally occupy lower-paid job positions (Kimmel, 248), were predominantly the ones to make the sacrifices to step in and to perform the extra care-taking duties.

Adrienne Rich has already addressed the aspect of social burden of care duties on women in the patriarchal structure in 1986 in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Rich eloquently highlights that "the physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens" (52). This social burden, as Rich calls it, has been strengthened by the pandemic, and the responsibilities have fallen predominantly on the mothers once again, as these personal narratives have demonstrated. The responsibilities are viewed to conform to gender binaries and heteronormative assumptions of gender due to their constant repetition of its performance in cultural spheres. Thus, caring re-

sponsibilities are assigned to women, and breadwinning characteristics are assigned to men, and this dualism is declared as the norm. As Sears puts it, "heteronormativity naturalizes and eternalizes culturally and historically specific forms of sexuality, framing particular household forms and divisions of labor as products of human nature and as necessary foundations for a healthy human society across time" (172).

Aligning with heteronormativity, caring duties and the obligation of care are central aspects in the narratives. In Augirre Sevillano and Niermann's stories, the question of structural care occurred. As a housekeeper, Augirre Sevillano cared for others in her profession and, thus, carried out paid social reproduction, but once the pandemic forced the facility where she worked to close, the system did not care for her and she was left without work and insurance. In addition, she found herself also caring for her daughter, who was out of work as well. The entire situation left her with no other choice than to take on a job that exposed her to the virus and thus made her vulnerable to the situation. Her body was exposed to a deadly threat because of her necessity to survive economically.

Butler argues that, "to be a body differentially exposed to harm or to death is precisely to exhibit a form of precarity, but also to suffer a form of inequality that is unjust" (*Nonviolence* 50). Based on this argument, Augirre Sevillano's situation symbolizes the unjust structures that the virus has made apparent and challenges the understanding of care as an individual practice targeted at other individual humans and non-humans (e.g., animals, the environment). Her story indicates that many are also left with no care by social structures, such as health insurance and/or paid leaves of absence that would have enabled them to cope better with this pandemic. Hence, the urge for global obligations with regard to care of all humans and non-humans has been made apparent. Augirre Sevillano's story should not and must not be viewed in isolation as an individual series of unfortunate circumstances, but must urgently be read through a social reproduction feminist lens.

The current globalized financialized capitalism recruited women into the paid workforce and enhanced a disinvestment from social welfare, which resulted in rising inequalities and a "dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot" (Fraser 25–26). The privatization of social reproduction, Fraser mentions in her analysis of our current capitalist regimes, can be linked to Niermann's narrative and her role as a child-care facility manager during the pandemic. The modern ideal of the "two earner family" (26) demanded caring facilities and the expansion of paid social reproduction, which turned care work into yet another good on the market. As part of social reproduction, however, the sector did not receive the same economic rewards and value as compared to economic production, which leads back to the gendered and racialized nature of social reproduction (Mohandesi and Teitelman 45). When the pandemic spread, caring facilities had to shut down and thus shifted the caring responsibilities back to the domestic sphere. The normative order that is present in our current "two earner family" was hence disrupted, and social reproduction conditions for capitalist production fell back to previous orders, where caretaking duties were carried out at home, predominantly by women. Yet, as a significant component of current structures, Niermann received a loan from the Paycheck Protection Program that helped her to conform to the safety regulations and to remain open. As a strong believer in "good, quality care," Niermann quickly re-opened her facility to continue to provide her service to the public to help maintain the economy. However, the pandemic has taken its toll on society, and only 17 out of 92 children returned, a result of parents out of work, no longer able to afford privatized child care.

The Question of Grievability and the Urge for Equity

As the previous section has discussed, the question of obligation of care has also demonstrated the lack of structural care and the obligations that the current neoliberal systems assign to individuals in order to make up for systemic deficiencies. Butler's understanding of "the force of nonviolence"

aligns with this and provides an approach to investigate the questions of grievability and the inevitable urge for equity which the pandemic has made transparent. Particularly Augirre Sevillano's experience and the work sector she is occupying exposes the "larger operation of biopower that unjustifiably distinguishes between grievable and ungrievable lives" (Butler, *Nonviolence* 56). The necessary exposure and the lack of safety measures that Augirre Sevillano encounters at her job as a fruit packer reflect the unequal understanding of whom to protect in a global health crisis. Hence, the narrative illustrates that the question of grievability of one's life is not merely a philosophical and moral discourse but rather becomes inherently political. Therefore, Butler's urge for the force of nonviolence provides an essential argument in the discourse and rightfully challenges the notion of violence with regard to solely bodily harm. According to Butler, nonviolence is needed to create a society where all lives are grievable and are thus equal, which eventually prevents systemic inequalities that are unequally harmful to all beings. A nonviolent framework would dismantle violent structures that expose one to vulnerability and threats to one's life, as seen in Augirre Sevillano's story. All living beings would be granted equal value (Butler, *Nonviolence* 58). It would be a principle that structures the "social organization of health, food, shelter, employment, sexual life, and civic life" (Butler, *Nonviolence* 59).

Previous to the pandemic, Butler had already remarked that "in this world some lives are more clearly valued than others, and that this inequality implies that certain lives will be more tenaciously defended than others" (*Nonviolence* 28). The current pandemic has stressed this observation, when not all had the means and rights to stay at home in order to avoid contracting the deadly virus. Not only were doctors and people in the health-care sector heavily exposed to COVID-19, but also workers on the production lines, such as Augirre Sevillano when she was a fruit packer, where she got infected after only a few days of working. The limited hygienic measures in a number of occupations in comparison to the high standards and great means in others demonstrate the rampant inequality present in current structures.

Augirre Sevillano's story reflects what Butler theorizes in her understanding of nonviolence, stressing the need to "recognize pervasive forms of inequality that establish some lives as disproportionately more livable and grievable than others" (*Nonviolence* 17).

Following the aspects of grievability and equality, in her remarks on the pandemic, Butler raises the question of what it means to shelter in connection with the notion of nonviolence. She argues that the discourse on sheltering in "a place, in a home" was strongly influenced by the notion of the bourgeois household ("COVID"). The perception that every human (and non-human) has a shelter where they can remain to safeguard themselves from a virus is dictated by the assumption that everyone possesses this kind of place. Butler asks, "What if there is no shelter? Or what if the shelter is a space of violence? What if the shelter does not allow for sheltering from the virus, such as a prison?" ("COVID").

Similar to Butler (2020), Žižek also discusses the class division that the pandemic has brought to the forefront and challenges the assumption of a global possibility for safe isolation as well. He juxtaposes in his analyses of the pandemic the situation of workers outside and inside the home and how their livelihoods are necessarily intertwined and dependent on one another in order to function: "Many things have to take place in the unsafe outside so that others can survive in their private quarantine . . ." (Žižek 26). This new dimension of class division resonates with Butler's investigation and is seen in the female narratives as well. Whereas two out of the four women had the possibility to work remotely from a safe shelter, one was urged to risk her health entirely by entering an unsafe work environment, and one could not carry out her job at all in the safety of her home.

While some had the opportunity to remain sheltered in a house, others, due to the lack of an actual shelter or an economic need to leave it, were made vulnerable to the current situation based on persisting inequalities.

Combating these inequalities, Butler argues for a nonviolence framework particularly because this framework will not make sense without a commitment to equality (*Nonviolence* 28). Nonviolence relies on "a sustained commitment, even a way of rerouting aggression for the purpose of affirming ideals of equality and freedom" (Butler, *Nonviolence* 27) and is therefore an inherent feminist approach which urges one to value the intersections, interdependencies, and the relationality of beings, materials, and structures. Following Butler's train of thought, the pandemic has made transparent the inequities rooted in current neoliberal systems. The female narratives discussed here have supported and vividly described the consequences of these systems and have thus stressed the urge for equity reflected on their personal level but also on the collective level.

Conclusion

To conclude, this analysis of the female narratives presented in *The 19th News* has made evident that the pandemic has exposed persisting cultural assumptions that construct inequalities whose acknowledgement is long overdue (Butler, "COVID"). The shutdown of institutions such as schools and child caring facilities has highlighted the persisting gendered nature of social reproduction. Without women stepping down from their role in the paid labor market and retreating to unpaid labor, predominantly in the home, capitalist structures would have collapsed further. Thus, this analysis has demonstrated that it is urgent to "understand that the relationship between wage labor and capital is sustained in all sorts of unwaged ways and in all kinds of social-spaces – not just at work" (Bhattacharya 92). Consequently, reading the COVID-19 crisis through a social reproduction feminist lens is essential to challenging the status quo and questions political and social structures that are created to benefit a few and oppress many.

Hence, these women's stories have provided an exemplary collection of lived narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Carrazana has created a

magnifying lens with this article that urges one to reflect upon the pandemic from a feminist standpoint. Furthermore, Butler's notion of nonviolence in combination with the mediation of social reproduction feminism has proven to be a productive approach to challenging the current structures that were exposed in the women's stories. In the longstanding feminist tradition of valuing personal narratives, storytelling practices and life narratives are crucial insights into the understanding of individual livelihoods positioned in political and social structures. Global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic cause interference and thus alter these narratives – which makes it even more crucial to examine and investigate them through a feminist lens. These narratives can function not only as a decisive starting point to challenge neoliberal notions of individualism but also as evidence "to accept interdependency as a condition of equality" (Butler, *Nonviolence* 47).

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