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Summer 2019
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by Mariana Alessandri

There are no Mothers

Janelle Hanchett recently published a memoir about raising multiple children as a non-functioning alcoholic and drug addict. *I'm Just Happy to Be Here* shows the author heaving her recalcitrant body into the straitjacket of ordinary life. For years she couldn't do it. Her kids got taken away, multiple times and for multi-year stretches, while a sodden Hanchett raged against mediocrity. Like so many mothers today, she felt destined to more than a domestic life. Except for the 72-hour benders, gross negligence, and domestic violence, her story is relatable. Mothers everywhere want to be more

than just mothers. I suggest that we stop being them altogether.

Hanchett's life was far from balanced. She threw herself into serial identities as though each had the power to define her once and for all: Student, Mother, Wife, Addict. For Jean-Paul Sartre, adopting fixed identities is an attempt to dodge our freedom, the transcendent part of us that stubbornly exceeds our grounded, imminent selves. For Sartre, freedom is more burden than blessing, and he says that we try to skirt it more often than we realise. Instead of bearing freedom's weight, for example, many of us hitch ourselves to convenient jobs, spouses, or lives that we later come to resent. Sartre believed it is easier to contort ourselves to fit society's pre-prescribed roles than to admit that we don't have to. It's as though we make decisions behind our own backs,

and then wonder how we ended up here, in a life we didn't choose. Some of us are so wary of freedom that we are willing to adopt the label 'screw-up' rather than admit that we're making one bad choice after another. The most desperate among us – and perhaps the most existentially astute, like Hanchett – will do anything to deny our freedom, including tricking ourselves into believing that we're acting freely. If Hanchett had been an existentialist, she might have concluded that it's easier to be chained to alcohol than freedom. When you're free, you're responsible for where you end up. And if your worst fear, like hers was, is failing to live up to your potential, then why not throw the game? At least you could say that you never stood a chance. Sartre believed that we cheat ourselves daily, in serious and trivial ways alike.



Like Hanchett, many of us long for an undeniable, inescapable challenge – a chance to become somebody, something. A mother, perhaps. But such desire is based on the misunderstanding that Mothers exist. It's to make Mother a noun. On Sartre's reading, there are no Mothers. Or Screw-Ups. Or Waiters, or Accountants, or Philosophers. These are just roles that we play. In trying to cast off our subjectivity we succumb to what Sartre calls "bad faith". Affairs are perhaps the easiest cases of bad faith to diagnose. A cheater announces that she's no longer in control of herself, that she's not responsible for her actions. *I can't help it* is bad faith's motto. Busy-ness is its accomplice. Keeping busy is the way we moderns avoid the existential crisis that would surely come from an honest look in the mirror. But we can't avoid the mirror forever, and Sartre said we can never fully lie to ourselves either, thanks to our transcendence. Hanchett thinks like an existentialist when she writes that at some point, alcohol stopped working. Freedom had outrun her, at which point she began recognising junkies as junkies. After years of playing the Screw-Up-Terrible-Parent-Drug-Addict, Hanchett admitted that she was free.

Like the alcoholic, the workaholic exercises her right to reject parenthood's mundane responsibilities, like bathing and feeding toddlers, but she does so dishonestly. She pretends she has no choice because of whatever noun she's trying to become. Perhaps Very Busy Mother, or Successful Career Woman. The first step in combatting bad faith is recognising that these characters don't exist. They are just roles that we play, none of which cancels out our transcendence. Admitting that we play multiple roles can give us

some of the grounding that Sartre says we crave minus the collateral damage of our imagined consequence-free behaviour. It can also keep us from seeking an identity to shield us from freedom. The Sartrean corrective to bad faith? Quit being a Mother.

I don't have to be a workaholic to know that office work gets me out of

Owning our feelings and especially our actions constitutes a rejection of bad faith.

taking care of my kids, so if I don't feel like doing it, I should just admit it. When I was still a Mother, I invented reasons not to play with my kids, but I felt too guilty to own up to it. After all, Mothers want to play with their kids. Cooking had always been a common way for me to buy myself time, but as a Mother in bad faith, I acted as though I were making a sacrifice for my family. Then Sartre stepped in to translate for me. He said that when I said I was busy cooking in the kitchen, what I meant was, see me as more than for-you. I'm also for-others. I'm for-my-friends and for-my-spouse and, sometimes, most importantly, for-myself. Sartre got me to admit that I get tired, that I crave time to think, that I like to be alone. Owning our feelings and especially our actions constitutes a rejection of bad faith. And rejecting Mothers helps too.

Since I've stopped being a Mother I no longer live for my children (which in many US contexts is almost heretical to admit). I live alongside them and I take care of them. Daily, they watch me play at being a mother, woman, teacher, cook, activist, friend,

writer, daughter, sister, etc. These roles are not in direct competition, though they do sometimes conflict. Recently, when I told my six-year-old I would be going on a short beach vacation with my best friend, he asked: "Why do you want to leave me?" I answered honestly: "I don't want to leave you, but I do want to join my friend at the beach." Over the years I have learned that playing a teacher makes me better at playing a mother, playing a mother makes me better at playing a daughter, and that playing a friend certainly makes me better at playing everything else. As long as we are choosing non-abusive and non-deceptive means, it's good for children to see that we play roles but aren't reducible to any one of them.

Life is existential play, thought Sartre. But there is no balance to be found in his theory. The work/life balance metaphor pretends that work and life are the only two factors that count toward a successful existence, and that these two poles must always be held in check, perfectly balanced. This faulty narrative ignores that we are complex and variable, always existing and always playing. It also assumes that balance is better than imbalance, which I doubt. Worst of all, it paints Mothers as objects and not players. Sartre would say that instead of trying to achieve work/life balance, we should get busy playing our existential roles, freely and responsibly. This begins when we quit being Mothers. ▣