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"I've Got to Succeed, So She Can Succeed, So We Can Succeed": Empowered Mothering, Role Fluidity, and Competition in *Incredible* Parenting

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Abstract: The social influence of Disney discourse is difficult to ignore, as is their repetitive matricide and positioning of the patriarchal and heteronormative family model in their bloc.kbuster animated films. Yet, through its Pixar Animation Studios subsidiary, Disney has pushed progressively at the boundaries, not only in terms of animation artistry but also through the social topics explored. This study builds on previous research of male mothering in *Finding Nemo* by visiting the subsequent 11 Pixar animated films, with in-depth exploration of their most recent release, *Incredibles 2*. Ultimately, I argue that Pixar has once again opened space by embracing empowered and collaborative parenting.

Keywords: Disney; gender; motherhood; media criticism; family roles; masculinity; empowered mothering; Pixar

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"Done properly, parenting is a heroic act.

Done properly.

I'm fortunate that it has never afflicted me." (Edna Mode, *Incredibles 2*)

1. Introduction

In 2003, Walt Disney Pictures via its Pixar Animation Studios subsidiary released *Finding Nemo*, a movie that as of 2018 has grossed one billion dollars worldwide (IMDB) and garnered the studio multiple awards, including four Academy Award nominations and an Oscar win for Best Animated Feature Film. Not only did this film entertain millions and significantly increase Disney accolades and profitability, it also became part of larger media and culture analyses of the Disney animated repertoire. In addition to the many media discussions of its creative vision and astounding box-office success, scholarly analyses abounded, ranging in topic from the beauty and finesse of the animated visual artistry (Cohen 2003) through the social and ecological impacts of anthropomorphizing animals, (Tidwell 2009; Militz and Foale 2015) to its representations of disability (Baxondale 2004; Preston 2010).

In previous research, I explored what I considered to be important about *Finding Nemo:* that for the first time in its discourse, Disney opened up space for a male character to mother (Brydon 2009). After complimenting Disney for stretching the boundaries of what mothering could look like and who could perform it, I ended my exploration by lamenting what appeared to have been a step backward in mothering representation with their 2004 release of *The Incredibles*. Creative and progressive in some ways, *The Incredibles* (2004) also relied on long-standing stereotypes about gender and family roles, with father, Bob Parr/Mr. Incredible, as a career-driven and hyper-masculine superhero focused on his breadwinning abilities and led astray by another woman, and mother, Helen/Elastigirl, as a stay at home mom who literally stretches herself thin to save her family and her marriage. In addition to their pre-verbal infant, they were joined by elementary-age son Dash Parr, whose super speed means he never sits still (epitomizing the modern ADHD-afflicted boy), and teen daughter Violet Parr,

whose superpower was her ability to become invisible, especially around boys. Echoing some of my concerns, McMillan (2012) echoed many of my concerns in her analysis of the problems at the core of *The Incredibles*:

> While Bob gets his superhero groove back and Dash learns that sometimes you have to hold back in order to make the little people feel okay about themselves, Helen frets about the stability of the family and Violet gains enough confidence to ensure that she can wear more colorful clothes—a pink shirt, of course, because she's a girl—and talk to the cute boy in school. (par. 11)

Despite the impressive strength and abilities exhibited by the female superheroes in *The Incredibles*, ultimately the film emphasized the same old patriarchal, heteronormative structure we have seen in family films again and again.

It has been nearly a decade since *Finding Nemo* was released and Pixar's (therefore, Disney's) influence has only increased. Since 2000, Pixar alone has generated over $1.6 billion in gross box-office revenue for the Disney Corporation (Lynch 2018). Its financial success (via theatre sales, digital content, and merchandising) positions it as a leading cultural orator, as having the power to not only change movie history (Zorthian 2015) but to change what it means to be a person (Munkittrick 2011). As a key creator of our cultural texts of gender and family, Disney texts, generally, and Pixar's, specifically, deserve close and recurrent reflection. It is with that in mind that I explore Disney's portrayal of mothering in the years since *Finding Nemo* and of who performs it, with particular attention to its current bloc.kbuster: *Incredibles 2* (2018). What reveals itself is, in fact, a slow shift into the complexities of modern parenting and a recent embrace of empowered mothering.

Motherhood and Disney Discourse

American cultural texts (read broadly as social norms, books, media, etc.) and their consumption and utilization serve as evidence that "one is indeed not born, but must become a mother" (Coats and Fraustino 2015, p. 108). In broad cultural strokes, motherhood can be described as a state of gendered (historically female) action rooted in physical, time-consuming, hands-on care for children. This begins for many women at pregnancy, birth, and/or breastfeeding, but extends beyond that to long-term, daily nurturance and caregiving. This differs from notions of fatherhood, which Ruddick (1997) argues is rooted in three key elements: distant provision (acquiring the means to buy goods), protection (willing to show physical strength and toughness), and authority (rule-making and consequence creation). Both motherhood and fatherhood fall under the cultural concept of parenting, holistically described as the "complex, ongoing work of responding to children's needs in particular economic and social circumstances" (p. 206).

As women are not always or automatically mothers and men are not always or automatically fathers, we can think of mothering or fathering, like any stereotypically gendered behavior, as cultural performance (Butler 1990). Viewed through a feminist lens, this allows for us to separate motherhood from gender. In that way, women do not have to assume a mother identity, and men can be allowed to engage in mothering performance. This perspective differentiates mothering performance from motherhood or maternalism as a cultural construct, the latter more rooted in mother as a specific, gendered entity born to be "intuitively more empathetic, less exploitive, and more closely attuned to relational ambience than men" (Tucker, as cited by (O'Reilly 2016, loc. 209)). By separating mothering from motherhood, we make it easier to see mothering as "work that is valuable to society . . . [but that] is not, and should not be, the sole responsibility and duty of mothers" (loc. 243). Taking a more performance-based approach allows us to identify a set of parameters to define what mothering could mean in a culture or specific discourse, who is performing it, and what constitutes "good" or "bad" mothering.

Western media representations of good mothering are rooted in privilege. They are narrow in scope, heteronormative, white, and upper/middle class in expectations of what successful or good

appears to be. Due to the enormous impact of the Walt Disney Corporation's position as primary cultural storyteller for families and children, its representations of mothering are arguably some of the most important to explore. Not only is Disney's impact on American families significant, but as Zipes (1999) notes, families in Disney films are portrayed as models of behavior to be emulated and their storytelling "colonizes other national audiences" (p. 352). The fairy tale has long been "used . . . to comment on the civilizing process and socialization" (p. 337) of a culture and most commonly "reinforced patriarchal symbolic order based on rigid notions of sexuality and gender" (p. 338), and it is on these storytelling origins that the Disney empire stands. Fraustino (2015) takes that claim further by emphasizing the increase in power Disney has begun to wield now that their stories are truly timeless via digital formats that can be bought, streamed, purchased, and replayed by children for decades while parents are busy in the other room—the modern day "Mommy's little helpers" (p. 141). Suffice it to say, it seems impossible to overstate the impact of the Disney discourse, which is why so much scholarship exists there.

For more than half a century, Disney tales were fairy tales; however, the original tales written by the Grimm brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, and others, upon whose bones the Disney stories were fully fleshed, did not perpetuate the WWII American Dream patriarchy seen in most Disney films. The original stories were nearly always altered by Walt Disney Studios to kill off caregivers (mothers much more than fathers) under the guise of narrative plot development, and most were sanitized to eliminate any excessive violence or transgression that conservative Western families might find unpalatable. In terms of family formation, Disney has preferred the stork method of infant delivery and the firm positioning of women as love interests, first, and mothers, a close second. Young Disney heroines are "twitterpatt[ed] . . . into idealizing the romance that leads to the making of the patriarchal family" (Fraustino 2015, p. 129) but are not shown engaging in the "real cycle of life—of menstruation, sex, pregnancy, and parenting (because we all know how little mothering Disney heroines get)" (pp. 131–32). Although this sanitization may have originally developed as a response to constraints by the Motion Picture Production Code of what could be shown on the screen, those constraints expired in 1968, yet the sanitization remained far beyond that expiration date. Intentional or not, these widely consumed cultural texts have played a part in preserving the patriarchal order of power. (p. 131) against which women have struggled for decades. This proffered perspective—that Disney cinematic messaging is powerful and patriarchal—is certainly not new, nor is the backlash that feminist critiques of Disney films have prompted. Understandably, our culture learned to see the world through the Disney lens for so long that "such scrutiny isn't easy for parents and grandparents who grew up internalizing the same messages, including the mothering ideology that reproduces not only itself but also male dominance in society" (Fraustino 2015, p. 144). Yet, decades of analyses of Disney texts by scores of scholars from all disciplines support the stance that little changed with mothering representation between its first full-length animated film release in 1937 and *Finding Nemo* (2003).

Disney mothers have been consistently portrayed, when they are portrayed at all. Mothers in the last decade of the Disney repertoire remain nearly invisible, as matricide (or, more generously, mother absence) has long been a fairy tale action device and remains Disney's modus operandi for character development and audience bonding with the protagonist. Killing the parent (usually the mother) allows the young hero(ine) to mature through the precarious position it places the orphaned children in. There has been an historical dearth of mothers in Disney's animated fare and mothers with integral story roles in the last ten years remaining limited. As of 2006, only 10 of Disney's 39 animated films with sustained plots featured living mothers, and all of those mothers were either killed during the film or incapable "of protecting their offspring from harm" (Davis 2006, p. 102). When featured, though, Disney mothers have traditionally been written as hyper-feminine, in their texts (e.g., use of relational language, emotional and timid nonverbals such as crying and gasping, engaging in selfless and service-focused actions) and their somatexts, or texts of the body (e.g., drawn diminutively with graceful gestures and hourglass figures, excessive makeup, stereotypically feminine clothing, interacting through touch and dance). To quote the Disney definition verbatim:

> "Well, a mother, a real mother is the most wonderful person in the world. She's the angel voice that bids you goodnight, kisses your cheek, whispers, 'Sleep tight' ... The helping hand that guides you along, whether you're right, whether you're wrong ... Your mother and mine." ('Your Mother and Mine', sung by Wendy (Peter Pan 1953))

Before *Nemo,* I argued that Disney films retaining mothers as part of the story often fell into one of four types: the animalistic mother (e.g., *Dumbo* (1941); *Bambi* (1942); *The AristoCats* (1970); *Tarzan* (1999)) who performs mothering instinctually and stereotypically; the anthropomorphized mother (e.g., *Beauty and the Beast* (1991); *Pocahontas* (1995)) who is often older and immobilized by her current position; the fragmented mother (e.g., *Lady and the Tramp* (1955); *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990); *Toy Story* (1995)) who is an incomplete, disembodied person with no literal voice; and the mother of color (e.g., *Mulan* (1998)). Regardless of type, however, "Disney characters engaged in mothering ... have been required to be women and to desire an existence in/around the home" (Brydon 2009, p. 136). With *Finding Nemo*, however, I proffered there was a disruption, less so to the mothering norms as to the allowance of who could perform it. In *Nemo*, not only was the father, Marlin, allowed to live—which was not completely unheard of in Disney discourse (per Davis (2006), through 2006, 19 out of 39 films feature a father)—he was also different. As Disney defined it, Marlin was allowed to mother. Marlin shared food, groomed, nurtured, and taught. He tucked Nemo in, displayed emotions previously assigned on screen only to women like fear and worry, and was drawn with a feminine somatext (smaller body shape, timid movements, emotional gestures). Even better than previous Disney mothers, there was no romantic build up in Marlin's storyline. He was a dedicated, solely-focused caregiver. Nemo came first; all else came second. Perhaps most importantly, Marlin performed mothering as a part of unremarkable daily life. No one, himself included, mentioned it as unusual or anything other than expected. He was simply the primary nurturer. In this way, Marlin performed as mother within the Disney discourse.

Since *Finding Nemo,* the Walt Disney Company has increased the number of films released featuring young protagonists with living, loving mothers (even if briefly), such as *The Princess and the Frog* (2009); *Tangled* (2010); *Frozen* (2013); *Inside Out* (2015); *Finding Dory* (2016); *Moana* (2016); and *Coco* (2012). Unfortunately, in each case mother's love is sparing as the child spends most of the film separated from the mother and battling the adversities that accompany that separation. Explorations of Disney films by Holcomb et al. (2015) support the finding that there have been advancements in the nurturing and caregiving behaviors engaged in by parents, men in particular, in Disney's animated films, especially in the area of emotional nurturing and protection. Yet, they also confirm the continuing absence of strong mother roles. Importantly, they label much of this masculine caregiving in Disney animation as being performed by created kin and othermothers (communal and/or foster caregivers) and not by traditional, biological fathers. Arguably, widespread distribution of blockbuster films that allow communal childrearing is positive and progressive. The catch is, when a father is present in the film, shifting the nurturance to an othermother implies the father is unable or unwilling to perform that function. For example, positioning Bambi's father as overarching protector of the forest and Bambi within it shows some level of involvement, yet visually drawing him as distant and removed from Bambi's day-to-day life remains problematic. And, a nice as it may be to hear Jasmine's father, the Sultan, in *Aladdin* articulate interest in his daughter's happiness, he spends most the movie in his chambers playing with toys and attempting to transfer his responsibility of her caregiving by finding her a spouse (Åström 2017).

Within the Disney realm, the Pixar Animation Studio films have arguably driven the most progressive gender and family narratives. As Gillam and Wooden (2008) noted, Pixar has helped reshape animated images of masculinity in films such as *Toy Story* and *The Incredibles* (and I would add *Up* (2009)) by emasculating alpha-males, allowing them to engage in emotional sharing, vulnerability, and nurturing same-sex male bonding. That progressive brush stroke was taken a step further in *Finding Nemo*, as Pixar illustrated widescreen space for a man to specifically perform mothering. Marlin's mothering performance in his environment was indicative of what Gatens (1999) positioned as key to mothering: physical and emotional labor, domesticity, and nurture. Although his actions

while his wife was alive were traditional and heteronormative, including acting as breadwinner ("Did your man deliver, or did your man deliver?") and seeking sexual play as a way to "win back [his] partner's attention" (Gatrell 2004, p. 131), through the majority of the film he performs mother. Marlin's performance remains distinct even from Sully's in *Monsters* (2001) or, later, from Mr. Fredrickson's in *Up*. Despite Sully exhibiting many of the same maternal behaviors, as he cuddles and nurtures the human baby, Boo, who gets stranded in Monstropolis, Sully's love may be permanent, but his caregiving is temporary. Here, he serves as created kin. He is not father to Boo; instead, he serves as protector for the child until she can be returned to her family. In this way, like Mr. Fredrickson in *Up*, who is forced to serve as temporary caregiver for Russell when the boy is inadvertently dragged along on Mr. Fredrickson's escape from the city, the caregiving, albeit protective and necessary, is short-lived.

Since 2009 when I last explored the Disney film repertoire, Disney's Pixar division has released 11 full-length, animated feature films. Of those, several feature young children or adolescent protagonists receiving parenting without resorting to matricide or patricide: *Up*, *Brave* (2012), *Inside Out*, *Finding Dory*, *Coco*, and *Incredibles 2*. Of these surviving parents, Russell's mother in *Up* has less than 30 seconds of screen time and no dialogue; his father is never seen but is mentioned several times as uninvolved. In *Brave*, we see an emotionally close father-daughter relationship between Merida and her father, Fergus, rooted in a shared love for archery, outdoor activities, and eating; yet, in no way does Fergus perform Disney mothering. What Fergus seems to appreciate most about his daughter is her stereotypically masculine behavior; in other words, he loves those elements of himself that he sees in her. His screen time is, instead, spent in hyper-masculine behaviors such as fighting, excessive overeating, singing about mounting heads to walls, bucking socially finessed behaviors, and, eventually, trying to kill the mother for Merida. The movie should be commended for the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship it represents and the amount of time the mother is allowed to parent. Yet, the mother spends half of the movie as a bear and several times is physically threatening to her daughter.

Family is a key theme in *Coco*, and intergenerational, communal caregiving is prominent. Miguel's mother and father are present in the film and live and work with him (the family runs a shoe-making business), yet they interact with him in ways equal to his interaction with his grandfather and extended family members. It is Miguel's abuelita, or grandmother, who performs as primary caregiver in the film. She engages in food sharing, emotional nurturance, and primary daily decision-making and discipline in the household. Miguel's mother is virtually silent in the film, his father repeats directives from the matriarch abuelita, and Miguel spends most of the film searching for the absent father (figure), his great-great-grandfather, Ernesto de la Cruz. In *Finding Dory*, the majority of the film is focused on Dory as adult, with occasional flashbacks of her childhood and parents. And, notably, the reason Dory gets separated from her family is because she attempted to make her mother feel better after she heard her crying in an open emotional display.

2. Mothering *Incredible* Children

Disney challenged that previous discourse, however, with *Incredibles 2*. The societal influence of "family-adventure movies" like *Incredibles 2* continues to expand as "the traditional children's or family film has been upgraded with a heavy injection of spectacular adventure to appeal to teenagers and young adults as well as their parents" (Ebrahim 2014, p. 5). Unlike the previously mentioned Disney feature films, *Incredibles 2* focuses once more on the intact, white, heteronormative, nuclear family, which we've surprisingly seen very little of (the intact part, anyway, as typically both parents are not allowed to be present). In the film, Helen (Elastigirl) is given the opportunity to work (illegally) as a superhero full-time (more out of necessity than desire, as the film begins with both parents unemployed) while Bob (Mr. Incredible) serves as primary caretaker for the children. Both parents maintain relationships with the children throughout; however, Helen's screen time is primarily spent fighting the villain (notably, another woman) and protecting the city while Bob's screen time is primarily spent feeding, teaching, ensuring safety, and providing emotional nurturance. She's a

motorcycle-riding, previously mohawk-sporting, fully-engaged mom who feels in many ways far superior to the men around her. With Helen at the helm, the family begins and ends the movie unified, stronger in their communal support (from each other and their superhero community) than their separation. For these reasons and more, we can view *Incredibles 2* as rooted in refreshing elements of a third-wave mothering paradigm initiated with *Finding Nemo*. This time, their progressive narrative allows for empowered mothering and role fluidity, as well as an embrace of the complexities and competitive nature of collaborative parenting.

2.1. Empowered Mothering

As in the original *Incredibles* film, each independent family member—Dash Parr (the son), Helen Parr (Elastigirl, the mother), Bob Parr (Mr. Incredible, the father), and Violet Parr (the daughter)—serves as a co-protagonist, with particular partnership between mother and father (I am excluding the baby, Jack-Jack, from the list of co-protagonists, as he is given far less screen time and, although his power comes in handy, he is primarily present when being cared for by another family member). Whether or not the children have no superhero identities because they have underdeveloped human identities or because during their lifetime superheroes have been banned is up for debate. Bob and Helen share equitably in terms of screen time and fall into what Ebrahim (2014) describes as Pixar's repetitive pattern of co-protagonist films where "two central characters . . . embark on a psychological and/or physical journey together or who are part of some kind of twosome in which their interaction is key to the characters' growth" (p. 6). However, their collaboration to save the family and the world is premised on gender role fluidity: Helen is able to fight the villain and reclaim rights for supers because Bob is at home caring for and nurturing the children.

O'Reilly (2016) denotes that "[f]eminist mothering differs from empowered mothering in so far as the mother identifies as a feminist and practices from a feminist perspective or consciousness," whereas empowered mothers "resist patriarchal motherhood simply to make the experience of mothering more rewarding for themselves and their children" (loc. 2504). Helen's Elastigirl does not act in a common, second-wave feminist way of calling for a woman to act as a "self-interested, fully realized, and autonomous unit[]" (Takševa 2018, p. 182), but instead acts as an empowered mother. In fact, although Helen embraces empowerment she seems to question any prominent discourse that would relegate her to one group or another. In both *The Incredibles* and *Incredibles 2* we are shown the same video clip of her sharing her views on patriarchal power in her pre-marriage youth: "Leave the saving of the world to the men? I don't think so." When given an updated, flashier suit with embedded technology, she voices concern about it changing her identity: "I'm not dark and angsty. I'm . . . Elastigirl!"

Repeatedly throughout the film, the villain, Evelyn, challenges Helen's perspectives on female empowerment. Evelyn seems intent on creating division between independence and interdependency. Helen, however, refuses to embrace the division. When Evelyn accuses her of having spent too much time in her husband's shadow ("Must be nice for you, being out front after all this time . . . .But, you have the stage to yourself now. People have to pay attention"), Helen, lightly mocks the accusation ("What? Like, it's a man's world and all that?"). At another point, Evelyn tries to coax a reaction after a disastrous encounter with another villain ("I'm just saying, if you had handled The Underminer alone, things would have been different."), yet Helen literally shrugs off the comment. Once Helen ultimately realizes that Evelyn is a villain, Evelyn chides her for being so bound to her interdependency ("If it wasn't for your core beliefs, we could have been friends") while Helen stands her ground ("At least I have core beliefs."). These pivotal interactions can be seen as a microcosm of the long-standing debate between third-wave and matricentric feminists, strength in self versus strength in the village. Instead of claiming a particular feminist paradigm, Helen articulates strength (and weakness) through confidence in herself and interconnectivity, through being in-relation. She successfully fights crime and captures villains alone, but importantly, she maximizes the effectiveness of her power through communal support. She moves through and experiences strength through relational support. Yet, Helen is empowered mother but not feminist mother, the first "demanding more involvement from fathers and

insisting on a life outside of motherhood" but the second owning "a larger awareness of, and challenge to . . . inequities of patriarchal culture" (O'Reilly 2016, loc. 2519).

Helen never indicates she sees caregiving as her sole and primary responsibility and positions it as simply one more thing in her life. In fact, she has arguably raised her kids to believe this, as well. Violet babysits multiple times and complains to her parents about being relegated to do this "while you guys did the important stuff," yet later acknowledges the benefits of being with Jack-Jack and his extensive powers. At one point or another, each family member refers to caring for the baby as a burden (albeit obviously one of love), but they also praise him and brag about his powers. In the second half of the movie, Mr. Incredible begins to embrace his role as primary caregiver and is shown patiently and methodically teaching him, redirecting him, and praising him. At the end of the film, after catching the villain and saving the city, Helen takes the baby from Bob and says to him and Frozone, "you guys got the next shift . . . I'm beat," thus perceiving caregiving as a break from her new "day job" but also as a moment in time, not an identity.

2.2. Role Fluidity

It is not unusual for speculative fiction, one type of which is superhero fiction, to demonstrate gender fluidity. More commonly, that gender fluidity is unidirectional and more behavioral than appearance-based. Female characters are much more likely to be shown engaging in stereotypically masculine behaviors like athleticism, strength, fighting abilities, and use of weaponry (think Wonder Woman, Storm, and Gamora) than male characters are to be showing exhibiting stereotypically feminine behaviors. It is difficult to name even a few instances of this in widespread superhero films, due to our cultural "effeminophobia" (Bray 2015). "the kind of gender fluidity that allows boys to consider the possibilities of male mothering is far more likely to be stigmatized than that which allows girls to take on more masculine roles and activities" (p. 161) which "privileges hegemonically masculine gender expression in all characters, male or female" (p. 161).

In some ways, the same goes for the fluidity in *Incredibles 2*, which occurs less through blatant physical appearance fluidity than it does through the bodies-in-action. Helen kicks, fights, and punches her way through each scene, but is obviously tiny in comparison to the men and sports perfectly coifed hair and thigh-high heeled boots while she kicks butt. Of interest, Disney chose not to "queer" Elastigirl's performance while allowing her to exude strength and power; they did not de-feminize her and they did not overtly sexualize her (despite the thigh-high boots). Disney also does not take Bob's caregiving role to the point of "dragging" him into motherhood, putting him in feminine clothing as he performs traditional mothering functions, as we see when Buzz Lightyear becomes Mrs. Nesbit before he can display emotional vulnerability. Instead, Bob's giant hands are gentle when he lays the baby in the crib to sleep and his exhaustion at providing full-time care for the baby shows up via the repetitive wearing of a brown robe and a 5 o'clock shadow. When Violet, at least two feet and 150 pounds smaller than her father, exhibits fury over one of his action, Bob stands in terror in the kitchen clutching a milk container, withering before this physically diminutive girl. With physical appearance alone and bodies in situ, most heteronormative physical appearance norms remain fully intact in *Incredibles 2.*

However, role fluidity is prominent. Physical protection, strength, and breadwinning (for Helen) and physical caregiving, vulnerability, and nurturance (for Bob) are key themes. Bob expresses sincere and repeated emotional concern for his daughter when she gets stood up for her date. He also shows vulnerability with his friend after finding primary caregiving difficult: "I broke my daughter. They changed math. I was supposed to get double A batteries; I got triple A." Finally, he articulates his parenting insecurities to his daughter: "I don't know what the right thing to do is anymore. I just wanna be . . . a good dad." Later in the movie, after serving as primary caregiver through most scenes, Bob is summoned (by the villain, as it turns out) to assist his wife who is acting erratically. His first move when he greets her is not to fight or strike, as he would have historically, but instead to communicate, to listen, to understand his wife, who is under mind-control by the villain. When that does not work, he tries to block and defend himself from her attacks but does not fight back. The villain

ultimately notices the traditional approach is not working, so using mind-control she has Helen distract him with a kiss (which he happily accepts). His openness to his wife's affection allows her to force a mind-control device onto him, as well. It is not until he is under the control of the villain that he reverts to his hyper-masculine, crash-and-bash ways. With his newly honed, emotional awareness, he prefers communication to confrontation.

2.3. Collaborative and Competitive Caregiving

Åström's 2017 exploration of fathers in recent animated films concludes matricide was still required in order for men to serve as successful caregivers and nurturers, noting "participatory fathers in animated films are [still] not prepared to share their children with the mothers" (p. 254). It has taken another year beyond her analysis, but it appears Disney has opted to embrace collaborative parenting. Although the opening action sequence puts initial burden on Helen for childcare—Helen first comes onscreen holding the baby and providing direction to the children about how to keep themselves and the city safe—when viewing the film as a whole, their parenting is collaborative. Both Helen and Bob engage in food sharing, teaching, disciplining, general domestic duties, and emotional and physical nurturing. Helen orders dinner for the family. Bob makes giant stacks of homemade waffles for the kids before school and does not allow them to eat "sugar bombs" for breakfast. Helen provides direction to the older kids as to how best to help protect the crowd during an attack. Bob stays up all night to learn "new math," so he can help Dash complete his homework. Bob cleans spilled cereal off the floor and sets curfews for his daughter's date. Helen insists Dash eats his vegetables before watching TV. Bob coddles the baby, reads to him, and changes diapers. Helen hugs the kids regularly and spoon-feeds the baby. Although, most scenes show them performing parenting separately, what they perform is equitable and they work collaboratively to ensure tasks are accomplished.

However, with that collaboration comes a healthy dose of competition. Helen initially voices concerns that Bob can perform equally as a parent. When deciding whether or not she should take the new superhero job, Bob encouraged her: "I'll watch the kids. No problem. It'll be easy." In response, Helen replies: "Easy, huh? You're adorable." During her first night away, he mentions Jack-Jack's name and before he can share a milestone with her, Helen leaps to the conclusion that something is wrong. When Bob gets defensive, she chides: "So, things haven't spiraled out of control the moment I left?" When Dash responds to difficulty with his math assignments with, "I'll just wait for mom," Bob replies with frustration: "What? She won't be able to help any better than I can!"Bob seems frustrated and disinterested in Helen serving as relationship liaison between him and his children and despite her initial chidings and his initial stumbles, he proves a competent caregiver. His frustration and exhaustion with what appears to be a competition builds up and ultimately spills over in a manic outburst just before he connects with his best friend: "I'm doing the math, fixing the boyfriend, and keeping the baby from turning into a monster! I'm rolling with the punches, baby!"

Interestingly, Bob's frustration over bonding and performance has emerged in real-life interviews performed with fathers who engaged in traditional mothering work, such as grooming, food sharing, emotional nurturing, and daily care:

> "The issue of relationships with children and who should mediate theses is linked with a sense of power within the parental relationship, and this might provide part of the explanation for why, once they had gained this, fathers were keen to maintain their involved status, even if this made life difficult for them at times." (Gatrell 2004, p. 145)

Yet, Gatrell (2004) notes that there is a power struggle at play in many co-parenting relationships:

> "While some women saw the practical involvement of fathers as purely positive change (often meaning that both partners could work, minimizing the amount of time spent by children with paid carers), others were territorial about their role as mother and principal carer, and did not wish to see this threatened by the father." (p. 147)

This competition glides alternatively across the public-private dichotomy. Both parents want to be successful as parents, but, both want to be successful in their careers, as well. When The Incredibles parents review the opportunity in bed and Helen balks at taking the new job, Bob persuades her on behalf of their mutual success; "You've got to, so I . . . so we can be supers again." He then jokes with her before she hits him with a pillow: "Do it, so I can do it better." As she leaves the house on her custom superbike, their conversation is caring but has traces of envy:

Bob: "You will be great."

Helen: "I WILL be great. And you will too."

Bob: "We will both be great." (standing stiffly, holding the baby)

Even when Bob breaks down and experiences a manic meltdown with his friend, he remains focused on on mastering parenthood while also opening career doors for them all: "I've got to succeed, so she can succeed, so WE can succeed." And, although his desire for a successful career position is not surprising, as "the provider role is an assumption, a given" (Blankenhorn, as cited by (Ruddick 1997, p. 208)) for men in heteronormative, white middle-class families, his desire to be a successful caregiver so both he and Helen can maximize their potential is.

3. Discussion

There are glimpses of communal caregiving in *Incredibles 2*, with care provided in varying degrees by Lucius, Bob's crime fighting sidekick, Frozone, and Edna Mode, the family's superhero costume designer who ultimately serves as "auntie" and passes along caregiver training to Bob. However, the blatant family structure is traditional, heteronormative, and nuclear, defined by "a strong sense of the separation of the unit of parents and children from both a more extended kinship network and from such non-kin-related persons as servants" and "marked by a norm of partnership between husband and wife and by the special role of the mother in shaping the character of her children" (Nicholson 1997, p. 31). In several scenes, both mother and father perform to those somewhat archaic role expectations. Bob does not fully embrace caregiving until Helen is required to leave. Helen, reluctant to leave home, constantly frets over the children's well-being while she is at work. When together as a family, Helen is visually represented as the primary caregiver until the final fight sequences and closure. In that way, we could read this text as proof that Disney, yet again, required removal of the mother in order to allow Mr. Incredible, as postmodern father, to care for and bond with the children (Åström 2017), and for that matter, to allow baby Jack-Jack to realize his full powers.

For me, this interpretation is too superficial. We could just as easily read this as an acknowledgement that many mothers who remain in nuclear, heteronormative family structures also share caregiving while working outside the home in order to meet the family's financial needs. As Feasey (2013) notes, economic burden increases "with rising numbers of stay-at-home mothers who have internalized the ideology of intensive mothering demanded of the 'good' mother" (p. 28), and Disney films have traditionally romanticized stay at home mothering. Allowing Helen to fully embrace both career and mothering—and perform successfully at both—is admirable, particularly in comparison to mother representation in the previous 80 years of Disney discourse. Additionally, the fact that mothering, as performance, is embraced and engaged in by a stereotypically gendered man in *Incredibles 2* is, to me, "incredible." I recognize, of course, that this opinion, in and of itself, is troublesome. One might argue what there is to celebrate in the fact that Pixar has not allowed this to occur in over nearly a decade since the release of *Finding Nemo.* I make no apologies for finding pleasure in positive change, however minor.

Of course, by praising cinematic images of men mothering and/or fluidly exchange nurturing tasks with female parents in widespread family films, I also run the risk of perpetuating what seems to be a cinematic obsession with fathers (Bruzzi 2005). A valid point, but one that decreases the value to be gained in removing mothering as a female assignment. Takševa (2018) summarizes:

> "Dominant feminist theory and the imaginary boundaries established around the field of women and gender studies are still constructed upon the assumed link between women's oppression in relation to larger social and political structures—including the assumed normative presence of the nuclear family and the public-private dichotomy—and mothering". (p. 179)

Although this film most definitely is premised on a nuclear family, we are ultimately left with the understanding that, moving forward both mom and dad will likely "shift" fluidly in and out of their public and private responsibilities equally, as the children—and the arm of justice—require.

Since the focal point of discussion here has been Disney discourse and mothering, my analysis would be incomplete if I did not mention the short film that precedes *Incredibles 2*. For years, Pixar has made it a habit of placing an animated short before their full-length animated film. Those shorts are frequently as talked about as the movie itself, and several have won Oscars for Best Animated Short Film (*Tin Toy* (1988); *For the Birdsn* (2000); *Piper* (2016)). The short film preceding *Incredibles 2* is titled *Bao* (2018) and is focused on an overprotective mother who is so desperate to maintain her control over her child (shown as a dumpling she created) and his safety that she literally eats him (or the representation of him) to keep him from leaving her. As the first Pixar short film to be created by a female Chinese–Canadian director and writer, the painstaking efforts that went in to making this film as authentic as possible to Asian-American audiences are commendable. Shi's mother even came to Pixar twice to give the crew dumpling-making lessons (Sandoval 2018). Yet, the film also serves as another chapter in the Disney women tradition, where identity is created through child nurturing and food sharing, and depression and anguish over children are common emotions.

I will, however, not resort to labeling the beautifully created short film as a step backwards. As Takševa (2018) is quick to point out: "Just as the category of woman is not universal—a stance for which academic feminism has fought long and hard to establish—the practice and experience of motherhood is not universal either, nor are the ways mothers may acquiesce to or may resist oppressive structures" (p. 183). There is benefit in continuing to explore men mothering, as well as allowing space for a broad spectrum of mothering performance, be that successful career mother, intensive mothering mother, or father mother. If, as third-wave feminist scholars postulate, mothering is one of many identities up for selection, we can allow room for an emotionally hyper-invested mother in *Bao* as much as we can allow Bob to serve as primary mother in *Incredibles 2*. That is a benefit of a matricentric perspective: it creates space for all of us to mother *Incredible* children.

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