

**'Operational challenges'\*: or, managing to get any writing done, whether it's Covid19  
or not**

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\*Quote from Matt Hancock, Health Secretary, 15th September 2020, on the total failure of government to adequately distribute equipment for their so-called Track and Trace policy.

### **Preamble**

This piece is not as polished as I would like, some references are missing and it could have done with another edit. But I was determined to get it done and avoid the depression and frustration of missing yet another deadline, this time because my disabled sister, who I care for, almost died in mid-March, and her disabled partner, who I also care for, had a heart-attack and almost died last week. How ironic that I almost failed to submit my piece for the very reasons that I put in my original proposal:

In this presentation I will focus on structural reasons why I have not got more writing done in my life, and how, in some ways (but not all), life has changed less for me than it has for many others under lockdown.

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In 2005 I wrote the following poem:

**So tell me, Ms Chester, how come you haven't finished your PhD?**

I am ill in bed  
I am very ill  
I have been in bed for four months  
I have dislocated my pelvis, but I am worried that I have dislocated my mind  
There is an extreme history of Alzheimers in my family  
So my anxiety is not entirely without foundation  
Those around me are reassuring  
And while I want desperately to be reassured  
I don't know if I can trust them  
I fear it is themselves they are reassuring, not me

My back gave way under the strain of caring  
For my partner  
For my sister  
For her partner  
For my son  
For my community  
And not enough for myself

It collapsed under the weight of ME, mental disability, vascular dysfunction, social exclusion, physical disability, learning difficulties, personality disorder, homelessness, depression, creeping authoritarianism, moral panics about hoodies, domestic duties, internalised oppression

The final straw was being given a first formal warning  
And two months to write two finished chapters of my thesis  
Because the so-called Education Support Office of my institution kept ignoring me  
Denied me support  
Denied I had disabilities  
Denied I was a carer  
And cared less

So that is why, to date, I have not finished my PhD

Although the poem focuses mainly on my caring responsibilities and my own health, there were other significant factors in my failure to complete. I am a working-class Jewish woman who knew nothing of imposter syndrome then, but the concept seems to have gained traction in the last 15 years. I think it means coming from a working-class background and not having sufficient confidence in your abilities or sufficient sense of entitlement to bluff your way through situations where you feel you don't know enough. Even though you know more than enough. Even when you know more than most of the middle-class people who have been taught how to bluff. That's how it feels to me, anyway.

Last week I did a taster session for a memoir writing course with a friend who has asked me to mentor her while she writes hers. After the session, I told my friend I was thinking of doing the course. 'Why would you want to do that?' she asked. An overdose of imposter syndrome, I told her, plus finding a means of combating my procrastination – or rather, forcing me to prioritise my own writing sometimes, if I can squeeze it in between looking after everybody else, if I can make myself feel that it is that important.

Reading the other papers submitted for this conference, I am struck by how elegantly written they are. I wonder if I have anything new to say, anything that has not already been said better somewhere else. Then I think about my decades of consciousness-raising, about how sharing experiences makes you realise you are not alone, and strengthens you for the fight against the patriarchal attitudes which have previously made you feel isolated and incompetent.

When I wrote that poem, I was also 16 years younger, less familiar with the ways that age and ageism can operate to stymie one's creativity – and this is another aspect made worse by Covid. My friend C is in her 70s, her husband is developing Alzheimer's and has prostate cancer, a number of their friends have died from Covid, and now she has to accompany her husband to hospital every day for treatment while dealing with his terror and confusion. My friend D is Asian and in her 60s, eight relatives of hers have died in the last year, her brother-in-law is dying of cancer in a foreign country, her adult children are very needy, and now she has to negotiate tortuous Covid-induced visa requirements to visit another foreign country (usually most open and liberal) to be with her sister while she has a major operation. Not a lot of time for exercising one's creativity there, then, and I have other examples – including me.

For the first three months of lockdown I was relatively smug about cabin fever, but then my partner and I had the most spectacular series of rows – though I can't remember now exactly what they were about! I have always had dreams about living in communes, during lockdown they have become more frequent and elaborate – is this my desire for a more expansive experience than being cooped up in my two-bed London flat with my ailing partner? I say 'cooped up', but in many ways, lockdown has not been that different to the rest of my life – I have periods of back trouble and viruses when I am confined to bed for several weeks anyway, I probably don't take enough exercise at the best of times, and I mostly work at home.

I realised I had to start taking exercise again as my ankles blew up out of all proportion when I tottered out of bed after two months of what may or may not have been THE virus – it was too early in the pandemic to get any sort of test, but it was definitely A virus. I was totally depleted and depressed at not being able to do any writing, despite supposedly having lots of time and little else to do except spend hours on the phone trying to sort my sister out. So as soon as I could I was spending too long sitting in front of my computer and hardly moving at all. Several rather tense discussions on the phone ensued with the women at the lymphoedema clinic, who had previously been calm and sympathetic, but were now obviously fraying a bit at the edges. I only went to the lymphoedema clinic in the first place to accompany my sister to her appointment, and before I knew it, I had been diagnosed with lipoedema – who had heard of this unusual disease previously, which I have apparently been suffering from all my life?

For some people with chronic illnesses, Covid has improved the quality of life. For now, some of us can be 'normal', we can attend webinars and Zoom conferences, just like everybody else, we can travel the world in comfort, and without it costing the earth. (My most memorable day was the afternoon I was attending a book history conference in New Jersey when Biden was declared president, and I'd been at a webinar in South Africa about African literature in the morning.) Funny how medical 'experts' have suddenly identified Long Covid as a brand-new disease which they can pour lots of research money into, when pleas from sufferers of ME and post-viral syndrome for our (very similar) symptoms to be taken seriously have been ignored for years. No wonder we feel ambivalent about how things will be post-Covid, wondering how quickly people will forget the bliss of car-free streets and air you can breathe. It's a privilege to have your most significant annoyance being unable to visit the hairdresser.

In 1996, I published an article which advised that Tillie Olsen's ovular book, *Silences*, is the volume which every working-class woman writer should keep by her bedside and refer to constantly. It is an extraordinary work of research and support. It reminds us that we are not alone and that our feelings of inadequacy are not our fault. It invites us to contribute our own creativity to the pool of existing material, and it certainly encouraged me to persevere with writing ...<sup>1</sup>

*Silences* (which originated as a seminar presentation at the Radcliffe Institute and first appeared as an essay in *Harper's* magazine in 1965) addresses reasons why women, and particularly Black women, working-class women, and mothers find it hard to find time to write, and seldom get published. In an insightful article in the *New York Times*, AO Scott revisits Tillie Olsen's work to great effect. He comments:

Olsen broadened the terms of Woolf's argument [in *A Room of One's Own*] and surveyed the gaps and lost years in various careers, and the different reasons (censorship, illness, temperamental reticence) that even outwardly successful writers didn't write. But she homed in on a vaster silence of "those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence the silence of centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity." She included herself. "Where the gifted among women (*and men*) have remained mute, or have never

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<sup>1</sup> Chester, Gail, 'Book Publishing – the Gentleperson's Profession?' in Sarah Richardson et al, *Writing on the Line: 20th-century working-class women writers*, London: Working Press, 1996

attained full capacity,” she continued, “it is because of circumstances, inner and outer, which oppose the needs of creation.”<sup>2</sup>

There is substantial evidence to show how little has changed since Tillie Olsen started writing. This is amply demonstrated by other presentations for this conference, as well as a plethora of academic articles (for example, Crook 2020), articles from *Columbia Journalism Review* [refs] and elsewhere, showing that writing activity from journalism to academia and beyond has been drastically affected by Covid, especially among Black people and women. All these difficulties are heightened when women also suffer from other discriminations which impact upon their ability to produce intellectual work, for example, being Black (Wright et al 2007; Stockfelt 2018), disabled (Clifford 2020), working class (de Waal 2019), or generally without access to money, as in the case of independent scholars (Chester 1996).<sup>3</sup>

Even feminists have been slow to acknowledge that not just gender and sexuality, but also race, class and other oppressions play a role in determining who does and doesn't get published. The publishing industry needs to employ the widest spectrum of people to facilitate the production of the widest range of books, not only those which maintain the status quo.<sup>4</sup> The economic climate, lack of confidence and opportunity to meet the 'right' people make it hard to get to the writing stage, still less to imagine a career in publishing. When discussing exclusion from the booktrade, as elsewhere in British society, issues of class remain highly contentious<sup>5</sup> but it is real: in a study exposing race, class, gender and pay inequalities, published in the journal *Cultural Trends*, researchers found that some 43% of people working in publishing, 28% in music and 26% in design come from a privileged background, compared with 14% of the population as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

In June 2020, just as the Black Lives Matter movement was taking off and the Black Writers Guild was formed (Cowdrey 2020), *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* (Saha and van Lente

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<sup>2</sup> Scott, AO, 'Tillie Olsen Captured the Toll of Women's Labor — on Their Lives and Art', <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/books/review/Tillie-Olsen-tell-me-a-riddle.html>

(A version of this article appeared in print on March 28, 2021, Page 1 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Tillie Olsen.)

<sup>3</sup> Chester, Gail, 'From self-publishing collective to multinational corporation: the publishing history of *In Other Words – Writing as a Feminist*', *Women: A Cultural Review*, forthcoming 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Chester, Gail, 'Culture Versus Commerce: The Publishing of Feminist Books Since the 1940s', in Laurel Forster and Joanne Hollows (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1940s–2000s*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Kerry Hudson, 'Kerry Hudson wrote about working-class novels. Then the backlash began', *The Observer*, 7 Oct 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/07/working-class-writers-explosive-debate>

<sup>6</sup> [Kit de Waal], 'Whatever happened to working-class writers?' 24th July 2016, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/14638710.whatever-happened-to-working-class-writers/>

2020), the latest in a line of such reports, was released. None of these reports ever discuss the relationship between content and personnel in publishing, it is assumed that the mere presence of a 'diverse' workforce will be enough on its own to produce more challenging content, but of course it won't. Considering the coincidence of its timing, this report will hopefully have more influence than its predecessors. Unsurprisingly, its main findings were that the book trade assumes a white, middle-class audience, and thus it finds itself unable to reach beyond that group; that BAME and working-class audiences are undervalued by publishers, both economically and culturally; and though publishers claim they would like to publish more writers of colour, they expressed concerns about lack of 'quality'.

There are clearly structural reasons, unrelated to Covid, why I have not done more writing in my life. In some ways, especially in the day-to-day conduct of my life at home over the last year, less has changed for me than it has for many others, but in one's dealings with external agencies it is clear how piling new restrictions imposed by Covid on top of ongoing austerity have combined to make a previously bad situation even worse. 'The Austerity Audit', a series of four programmes presented by Paul Johnson and broadcast on Radio 4 in September 2020 provided a valuable insight into the major areas of life where this intersection was particularly acutely felt: the justice system, local government, the welfare system, education, and the NHS – all the key areas which I, the people I care for, and all working-class people have to depend on for support, and have been sorely let down.<sup>7</sup>

2020 was a thoroughly ghastly year, often only slightly Covid related. Except that I have come to believe that everybody in the country – and quite possibly the world – has been driven a bit mad by the pandemic. I have a huge calendar shaped hole in my brain, so I keep thinking that things that happened in November a year ago happened six months ago at most, and things that happened three months ago happened the other week. I was seriously bullied at work, something that has never happened like that before. The threatening manner in which it was done would have been destabilising at the best of times, but the inability to meet in person, seems, in itself, to have made it easier to feel dissociated. I have wondered to what extent my antagonists have themselves succumbed to Covid madness. The media contains a plethora of information on how the pandemic has destabilised the mental health of the whole population, even among people who are normally mentally quite stable. Among other things, we have been coping with anxiety, depression,

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000vg8f>

claustrophobia, agoraphobia, a general loss of trust<sup>8</sup>, and much else, brought on by the death and uncertainty with which we are surrounded. Half a dozen people I had close connections with have died in the last year – maybe it was coincidence, as only one was from Covid – two died with cancer, one with Multiple Sclerosis, one with a stroke, and one was killed in a bike accident. I feel almost apologetic explaining that the latest person who has died was nothing to do with Covid, as if that deserves less sympathy.

Just as well I don't make New Year's resolutions – I would certainly have been disappointed with my performance in 2020. Before anybody in Britain acknowledged the pandemic, I was embroiled in my sister's cancer, leading on to the blood clot on her liver, worsening lymphoedema, blood thinning injections, bladder infections, diverticulitis, and antibiotics (various). None of them appeared life-threatening then, but all were endlessly time-consuming. I have filled many pages of my everyday notebook recording the twists and turns of my sister's inability to cope with apparently minor domestic matters which are nevertheless crucial for her well-being: the broken microwave turntable, her erratic mobile phone, the lack of an instruction manual for the new TV I ordered for her, and for which she got coerced into taking out an extended warranty, which I had already discussed with her, and she agreed she didn't need.

I never kept any sort of journal before the last few years, even though every writing guide says you should keep a record of your everyday thoughts to store up for when you come to do the 'real' writing – who's got the time? Even writing up the factual happenings, and sometimes just the bullet points, takes time and mental energy that is not always there. So I leave pages of gaps to come back and fill in later, but I rarely do, and even when I try, I often can't remember what happened a couple of days before. But if I didn't keep that everyday notebook, flawed and episodic and random as it is, I think I would go mad. How otherwise to go to a follow-up appointment with my sister's consultant three months after the last one and remember what was said before, especially as the appointment has to be on the phone on a three-way call that I have had to set up, because, despite its supposedly high-tech, the hospital has no way of arranging a three-way phone consultation?

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<sup>8</sup> Green, Alison, 'I Do Not Trust People in the Same Way and I Don't Think I Ever Will Again', *Slate*, April 12, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/04/office-reopening-anxiety-fear-mistrust.html>

All of this was made more arduous by not being able to visit my sister during Covid, as were our interactions (or lack of them) with medical personnel, sheltered housing staff, witnesses for her Power of Attorney, social workers, and police. Why the police, you ask? Being ill and disabled is not generally, most of the time, considered a criminal offence – at least, not officially. No, but on top of all that illness, my sister has been experiencing an advanced resurgence of the financial abuse she suffered previously from a devious and manipulative drug addict, which she failed – again – to tell me about until she had been fleeced of more than £1500 in two months, and which I only found out about by accident, which I was much more upset about than the actual loss of the money. Nevertheless, I have been forced to be entangled with the police, me, who is extremely wary of the police and always has been, who has an extensive and rigorous political analysis of the ills of the police, and who has been squirming inside as I have observed the righteous demands of Black Lives Matter to defund the police and abolish prisons. In desperation, I succumbed to getting power of attorney for her, as it seemed the only way of getting things straightened out. I resisted for a long time, thinking of all the extra work for myself, but it will avoid me having to worry about her financial affairs the whole time, which will be a boon.

In February 2021 the liver specialist said my sister's latest scan was completely clear and he didn't need to see her again. I was buoyant. One specialist down, three to go, I said, thinking that now I had plenty of time to write this piece – and all the other pieces queueing in my brain to be written. The trip to have my jab was like a day out. Being in the same space as 30 other people (socially distanced, of course) when I'd been in the same space with only one other for a year was exhilarating.

But within weeks, my sister complained of feeling like she was getting cancer again. I worried, she was off her food. More three-way phone calls with the GP. It's not cancer, they said, her lady parts are all clear – as if she couldn't have cancer anywhere else. Covid and cancer, the deadly twins, as if all other illnesses have been written out of the textbooks. It's a bladder infection, the GPs kept repeating. But somehow I knew it wasn't.

And I was right. My sister's bowel burst while I was attending the funeral on Zoom of a very dear friend. Fortunately, I managed an hour to grieve, in between the ever more alarming phone calls from the doctors and the hospital. She was in a coma for 12 days and has since been slowly recovering – very, painfully, slowly, but as they told me she might well die any



time in the first month, this is indeed progress. After two weeks of knife-edge anxiety I collapsed into bed with mental and physical exhaustion. I had scarcely got myself upright when my sister's partner had a heart attack, and as I write, he is lying in a hospital bed downstairs from her, waiting to hear whether he is well enough to have surgery. People tell me I am lucky to be able to visit them, even under strict Covid conditions of one person only allowed per patient, as in many hospitals there is no visiting at all. I didn't go today as this was my last chance to get my article finished, and who knows what tomorrow will bring?

So that is why, to date, I still have not finished my PhD, and I don't think I ever will, though writing a book with the material I gathered would be gratifying. Meanwhile I congratulate myself that between rushing around town collecting people's mobiles, making sure that there is enough money to pay for cat food, and picking up clean underwear, I have managed to get this article finished.