

Next, the Campus Interview

An Elegy for Graduate Student Mothers

This article offers a frank and candid picture of a mother managing the ins and outs of academic study and a campus interview for a tenure-track position. It offers a creative interrogation into the cultural conversation following motherhood in graduate school and points honestly and openly to a variety of responses in the author's experience. The article ultimately aims to make known the reality of campus visits for mothers and shed light on the cultural discomfort around the issues of academe and mothering.

I spent four years in college treasuring every moment of my courses and curriculum. I had interesting and attentive professors, and during class time, I felt as if I were finally learning everything I had always wanted to know. I was often reading in the library late at night and working on essays in the computer lab first thing in the morning. With like-minded classmates, I dreamed about graduate school—where everyone was serious about intellectual learning, like us, and where there were no fraternity parties or classmates in pajamas. We couldn't wait! I loved being with my female professors especially; they were all so bright and motivating. I hung on to every word of their lectures and began to feel further away from the tired and overworked women in the poor community in which I had grown up. Some of my professors were mothers: one walked to campus after dropping her children off at school in the morning, another had her daughter drawing on the floor when I went to her office hours. In a poetry course, we read Galway Kinnell's "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," where his son returns to his parents' bed after their lovemaking. Motherhood and an academic career seemed perfectly timed and comfortable enough, much like that sleepy child returning to his parents' embrace.

Indeed, academe can be a refuge for women. The feminist literature on women in academe has challenged traditional assumptions of the academy and what counts as scholarship in many fields. Scholarship on academic motherhood has likewise challenged normative ideas about work in the academy and mothers in academia. I saw the academy as a welcoming place, and I decided to apply to graduate school after some travelling and a few unfulfilling jobs. I wanted what I had imagined came along with a PhD: a fulfilling career, intellectual conversations, and parties full of educated people making jokes about literary fiction and political theory. “Oh, that’s not postmodernism,” someone would taunt, “it’s poststructuralism!” The room would erupt in laughter. More wine would be poured. Partygoers would stop to recite verse or point to pages selected from my many shelves of books. World music would play softly on the stereo.

I was twenty-seven when I started my graduate program. In the shared office across from mine, a young couple typed diligently on their laptops while their child sat and played nearby. The couple appeared so grown up to me, and their child looked so out of place. I had little to say to those parents, and I assumed we did not have much in common. Also, I could not help but notice that a child in this atmosphere seemed odd. Among conference rooms and seminar tables, quiet departmental libraries and computer labs, friendly professors with doors half opened, and grumpy professors with doors completely closed, little of the setting spoke to children or family life.

During the third year of my PhD program, after I had successfully written my qualifying exams, I told my supervisor I was getting married, and she recommended having children sooner rather than later. She had given birth to her only child in graduate school, and has since had a long and successful career. She is known as a student advocate, an excellent teacher, and a brilliant scholar and researcher. She has had Ivy League visiting appointments, written textbooks and chaired multiple departments. “Now is your chance,” she laughed. “It just gets busier from here.”

And it does. According to maternal scholars, women in academe often feel as if there is never a good time to have children, and many who become mothers begin to think outside of academe after the birth of a child (Bueller 287). A gendered and overcrowded tenure system often does not allow time or space for the raising of children, leaving many mothers feeling as if motherhood and the university system cannot coincide. Indeed, many public policies and universities themselves still assume a masculine model in standard employment relationships and perpetuate norms of female caregiving, both paid and unpaid (Vosko 27).

By the fourth year in my program, I had a lot more in common with that couple across the hall: I was one of them, a graduate student mother. After my son was born, everything changed. When he would fall asleep, I would

tiptoe to my desk, sit down at the computer, and slowly begin to revise my dissertation proposal. When I heard him stir, I would scramble to hit the save button, run into his room and nurse him back to sleep. When he was back in bed, I would start to work again. It was hard to stay focused and difficult to think long term: day-to-day life was a lot like sleepwalking. We could not afford regular childcare, so all I could do was hope that my son would start sleeping more and that my dissertation proposal would pass without revisions. Soon I learned to take my laptop to the bed and nurse him on my side, the glow of the computer lighting up his head as he fell back to sleep. I could scroll and edit, but it was difficult to type at a regular pace as I had to lean on my elbow and prop up my head with one hand.

Women pay what has been called a *baby penalty* over the course of their academic careers. A now-famous article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* notes: “Women who have babies while they are graduate students or postdoctoral fellows are more than twice as likely as new fathers or single women to turn away from an academic research career” (Mason 4). Having children not only makes continued studying difficult for mothers, but also marks tenure-track jobs as something unattainable after women begin family life. Scholarship on academic motherhood has noted the invisibility and even incomprehensibility of maternity in academe (Beard 144), and the topic of motherhood itself is often missing from the academy entirely. This invisibility of maternity and of families themselves is constantly reinforced, partly by the way that academics are socialized to expect to work much more than regular work hours. Mothers in the academy often struggle with visibility and fight to maintain their legitimacy as scholars and serious researchers (Beard 149), balancing the demands of the profession with maternal guilt.

I am a graduate student mother who picked up and left her university town to write from afar. This is difficult. I miss out on much of the invaluable networking that takes place in graduate school and also feel like what that couple typing on their computers while their child played must have felt like: an outcast who could not attend social events or graduate council meetings. For many mothers, the university does not feel like a place where we belong. Parent-friendly university infrastructure could certainly change this (Barber 140); at my university, we struggle to find a place that allows children to run on cold or rainy days, and I have nursed babies uncomfortably in departmental seminar rooms and faculty lounges. I trudge on, alone, a feminist mother who incomprehensibly moved to where her husband had a postdoctoral fellowship. Occasionally, when someone asks about my job, I say I am a teacher taking time off.

In fact, when I told my supervisor I was pregnant again, she laughed. One child in graduate school, perhaps, seemed reasonable, but two? My son was in

preschool when my daughter was born. I was travelling once a week to teach at my university for a while. One year, I took a maternity leave, and when my funding ended, I took an adjunct job closer to home. The university system's overreliance on precariously employed faculty leaves many of us scrambling to piece together contractually limited teaching jobs to make ends meet. Feminist political economists have connected this scramble to the increased feminization and commodification of labour, noting the "gendered precariousness" (Vosko 14) that exists in many workplaces. Indeed, scholars who happen to be mothers, more than others, fill precarious, part-time temporary positions in academe. This "world of the invisible" (Ennis 177) relies on hidden temporary faculty, the majority of whom are women who have taken "breaks" for motherhood. Indeed, certain events, such as the birth of a child, can increase all workers' exposure to forms of employment characterized by insecurity (Stanford and Vosko 86). As a mother with small children, I certainly felt as if I had chosen motherhood over scholarship. Somehow I managed to write a few chapters. Some book reviews were submitted and revised and inexplicably, I was able to make it to a couple of conferences.

I had written and revised a good chunk of my dissertation during those late-night nursing sessions and had published in a handful of journals. I was in the middle of my second maternity leave and my first term teaching an introductory course as an adjunct when I happened to come across a job advertising for a tenure-track position in my field. It was at a small liberal arts college less than an hour from where we were living. This is what is known as a *dream job* for someone like me who wants primarily to teach—to work at a college with a few dedicated faculty members where I might develop personal relationships in small classes like the ones I had as a student, the ones I dreamed about when I started graduate school. This job was so nearby and it was an actual chance for a real job in a market where there are only a handful of postings in the social sciences—and maybe only one or two in my actual field—each year. The market is such that many PhDs do semester-to-semester work by contract for a few thousand dollars a course and no benefits. Feminists have made an effort to understand why this choice is made more often by academic mothers than by others in academe, those mothers working as contract labourers or "hidden academics" (Ennis 177) who try to combine motherhood and scholarship. In labour studies, this situation is referred to as *flexibility*, a euphemism for the increased disappearance of income support and social security, the relaxation of labour market regulations, and the rising power of private actors—including universities—to determine the terms of the working relationship. These strategies have been increasingly employed over the past thirty years and have had marked effects on workers, leading to greater vulnerability and polarization. In academe,

flexibility has meant fewer teaching jobs in all fields and a drastic reduction in positions that come with actual job security. In my case, and among many other academic mothers, I assume, it feels like desperation.

As I read the job advertisement, I could not help but think, “This is it! I might have a real chance for a job.” And not just any job but a tenure-track job in my field and in a small, friendly department at a liberal arts college. There, the setting seems to speak to acceptable scholarship: old brick buildings standing between tall trees and landscaped greenery running down a hill toward a large, beautiful lake. It was what I had always wanted! It was not far away from our new home in upstate New York where we liked living: it had a preschool we loved and was where my husband had a job.

I read the job advertisement again and cried. I was so happy to see the perfect job in my field and so close to home. But I was teaching three days a week and I had a tiny baby—how would I ever get the application done? I was overwhelmed by the new course and feeling guilty that the dissertation writing had again been put on hold. The class was one I had never taught before. The students were demanding and the lectures seemed boring even to me. I had asked students to write weekly reflection papers, and I was grading thirty-four each weekend. I was preparing lectures late at night and still getting up with the baby once or twice. It was tiring.

I thought it would be impossible for me to apply for this job. My adjunct pay was so low that I could not afford childcare other than those two hours for three mornings each week that I was in class or commuting. I was trying to write the last two chapters of my dissertation. The students were emailing incessantly; the baby was not sleeping well; the preschooler still wet the bed; and my professional wardrobe was still tight on my postpartum belly. How would I ever make it through a gruelling two-day campus interview? I came across a website written by a former academic that said to *always* send the application because the chance that a campus interview will follow is very, very low. The competition is stiff! Still, she wrote, be prepared for it and think positively. Tell yourself: “Next! The campus interview!” as though it were right around the corner. I still wanted to cry.

The topic of motherhood is, more often than not, completely absent from the academy. Many scholars who are mothers feel on the margins of academe itself, envying those in a privileged place where no babies cry and clothes remain clean all day (Peterson 100). Indeed, Adrienne Rich, in her field-shaping work on motherhood as an institution, reminds us of women’s need for validation in history (85). Similarly, in academe, more than ever, we are fighting for visibility and validation as mothers and scholars and attempting to create systems of knowledge and understanding that refuse to leave motherhood aside (Peterson 103). My own dissertation is on knowledge creation and on the loss of women’s

bodily knowledge over time. Would women have had this knowledge to lose if they had not taken the time to mother?

Yet somehow I decided to send in an application. I carefully crafted a cover letter that touted the college for its student-focused learning and liberal arts environment. I wrote four detailed emails to committee members requesting letters that would specify how perfect I would be for the job. I spent weeks on sample syllabi for courses I could teach. My husband helped me write an inspiring teaching philosophy. I put together a forty-page dossier called *evidence of teaching effectiveness* with well-explained course evaluations, teaching documents, and commentary from colleagues and supervisors. I submitted proof of my language ability, an official course transcript, and a detailed research plan that included three student-driven projects. I spent months writing and preparing these documents, lying on my side, nursing, typing into the wee hours of the morning. “I can do this!” I tried to tell myself as I shuffled around in the morning, packing lunches, changing diapers, grading papers, printing my cover letter on letterhead and editing it again. After seven years of graduate school and multiple maternity leaves, I had taught my subject, other subjects in the social sciences, and basic writing courses. I had great students who had done wonderfully, failing students who had needed extra attention, and a handful who had cheated on tests and essays. I managed new course preparations and produced a variety of peer-reviewed publications. I worked as a research assistant, a teaching assistant, and a course instructor. And yet, when that beautiful small liberal arts college called to offer me an interview, I did not feel ready. I did not take the advice of that academic blogger. I did not actually believe they would call and I did not say “Next: the campus interview!” to myself as I was trying to fall asleep. Like many new mothers, perhaps, who struggle to balance maternal guilt with “scholarly legitimacy” (Beard 147), I had convinced myself I was never doing enough and could not call myself an academic. I answered the phone in the middle of the afternoon while the baby was crying and my four-year-old son was yelling at me for not cutting his peanut butter toast in half. Luckily, my husband was home and could distract the children while I answered, shaking my hand at him enthusiastically: “They called. They actually called!”

The chair of the department and head of the search committee introduced himself and asked if I were willing to come to campus for a two-day interview in the next few weeks. What I wanted to say was this: my economic class position has left me with forty thousand dollars in student loans, my husband has recently lost his postdoctoral funding and we are living on unemployment insurance. In fact, if you look at my day-to-day life, you will see that it is more like a stay-at-home mom than a serious academic. I take my son to preschool at 8:30 a.m. On Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I get up at 6:00 a.m., do a load

of laundry, find something that resembles a professional outfit, and leave a sleeping baby and a urine-soaked, crying preschooler. I leave at 7:30 a.m. to prepare my 9:00 a.m. class and down a quick cup of coffee on the walk across campus. On the other days, I still get up at 6:00 a.m. to do a load of laundry, wake the baby, change her, nurse her, and make us all breakfast. I then go to the gym, where there are two free hours of child care, and sometimes work out, but mostly I take those two hours to prepare my class, answer student emails, prepare discussion questions, and student assignments. The students can see through this: my tired lectures make them fall asleep; my hastily written discussion questions often fall flat. Sometimes I show up with nothing and, like them, have barely done the reading.

“All of this,” I wanted to say, “has prevented me from becoming a serious academic. You must have the wrong number.” Instead, I took a deep breath, put on my best “serious academic” voice and said: “Yes, I would love to interview! Thank you for the opportunity for a campus visit.” I took a moment after I hung up to imagine another academic life for myself, where I was not scraping by on three thousand dollars paid out over four months for an entire course after having done a month of free work to prepare the course and the readings, where there had been time and money to do that and do it well.

I often try to imagine a different academic world, where graduate student mothers are supported and encouraged, where the news of having children is not something to be ignored or laughed at, but to be discussed openly. Friendly interview questions such as “How do you see yourself fitting in here?” or “What does this have to do with the subject area in which we are hiring?” would be more realistic. At the ideal campus visit, the phrase “I don’t get it”—which was said to me by a tenured male professor after my actual job talk—would be frowned on as a rude opener and the more typical “that was interesting” preface that we generally take for granted as a sign of civility and collegiality would not be completely absent. At the ideal interview, I would not speak with a tenured male professor peering at me silently from behind stacks of books in an apparent effort to intimidate me. Universities would allow time and space for children, who would not only be mentioned but cared for, and mothers would not be the exception at campus interviews but the norm.

This is not that world, and that is not what happened. When I hung up the phone, I was excited but scared. I was afraid that they would see through me for what I was: a so-called academic on maternity leave who had read exactly one book in her field this year, who had not gone to a conference or presented a paper in almost two years, and who had only written a few words of her dissertation since that baby was born. What did I fear most? I feared that during the job talk breast milk would leak down the front of me, staining the front of

my blouse, and would leak through my plum-coloured suit jacket. After all, if I didn't get the job, I would need to return it to the store.

The Interview

Everything kicked into high speed, and my world revolved around the interview until it was over. I did the appropriate research on the department and the search committee. I knew what they had published, what they were teaching, where they attended graduate school, and where they had most recently presented papers.

The interview was to be spread out over two full days. It involved a meeting with the provost, and half-hour meetings with twelve individual faculty members, except one tenured faculty member who insisted on scheduling his for an hour.

I tried on suits for a friend to make sure they fit. She asked me to try on the other outfit for the second day and insisted I go to the store to get a non-nursing bra. I bought extra blouses and hid them in my briefcase in case the baby spat up all over the first one. I recalled a *Chronicle* article in which an academic mother recounted her own "bodily suffering" as she attempted to nurse her infant through the interview process (Smith 7).

I devised my job talk in the hours that the baby napped, only after I had gotten home from my adjunct position, after I had made dinner and gone to the grocery store, and after I had finished lying on my side and nursing my daughter to sleep. We scrambled for free childcare from single friends who felt sorry for us. I practiced the job talk for my husband, and he made suggestions and edited my power point slides. A friend brought us all lasagna the night before we left for the interview since we had not had time to cook. This one shot might be my only chance. My adjunct position could end at any moment, and I was afraid there would be no other possible route to a job and no possible way to support all of us indefinitely. Shortly before the interview, my husband lost his postdoctoral position, reminding us of the increasing precariousness of academic work.

Finally, armed with a borrowed briefcase, a power point talk, pages of notes on each faculty member, xeroxed and stapled sample syllabi and study abroad programs, I headed to the campus visit. I had let the chair know I had a nursing and would need to bring my husband to take care of her. Of course, since my husband would be with me, and since we had no one else to take care of the four-year-old, we would be bringing him too. I needed scheduled breaks in the two-day schedule of interviews with faculty, meals with students, and campus tours. The department administrator sent my schedule to me the day before I arrived with scheduled half-hour breaks, which I suspected was to be my nursing time. When I arrived, no private place was offered in which

to nurse. Should I sit in the hallway outside of the chair's office or perhaps the nice chairs by the windows where the students hang out before classes, I wondered. I saw the administrative assistant admonish a student for bringing her a receipt instead of getting petty cash first; her office didn't seem friendly for a nursing mother and cranky infant. It felt risky to admit to the search committee chair that I would be travelling with my family. We even paid for an extra night at the hotel because I could not imagine travelling with small children early in the morning and arriving at the interview on time without some major catastrophe befalling us.

When I had these so-called breaks, I rushed to see my daughter and to nurse her quickly, even if she started to cry and I started to leak everywhere. There was no space made available, so I nursed her in the car, running the engine in the cold November northeast.

The hour-long job talk, in which I presented my research, went fairly well, although I found those "I don't get it" comments offensive. The three tenured male professors discussed their lack of understanding my work among themselves as I stood at the front of the room. Many questions involved questioning my reluctance to do recent fieldwork. I wasn't sure how to address this: I had done a total of three years of fieldwork in the years before I had become a mother. How was this not enough? I wanted to say: "I was not able to do fieldwork since 2008 because I have been pregnant or nursing small children" and "My husband could not have exactly left the country when he was looking for a job." Instead, I said, "No, I haven't done recent fieldwork."

Toward the end of the two days of interviews, I realized that it will all come down to this: I am attempting significant scholarship during the parenting of two children. We have managed to survive a lost job, seven years of graduate school for each of us, and two maternity leaves. We have lived from paycheque to paycheque, from unemployment benefits to food vouchers, and have done applications for every example of financial assistance. Still, I teach three classes a week and bring home a 150 dollar paycheque at the end of it. We have managed student loans and extra borrowing for conferences and fieldwork. We have handled four-hour commutes to teach and extended trips for archival work and fieldwork. Now there is a forty-page bibliography and a three-hundred page dissertation to show for it, but still it feels as if I have managed to fail at this whole thing.

I received an email one month later letting me know that someone else was offered the job and had accepted. I am sure there were many reasons why I did not receive the job. I did not have a finished dissertation or a book contract. I shyly admitted to one of the faculty members that I wished my foreign language skills were better. I was embarrassed and not sure how to respond when, over dinner, a faculty member asked why I was staying at a hotel instead of the

campus apartment; soon it came out that I had brought along small children. I was intimidated in the question-and-answer session that followed my job talk, and I did not answer the questions well. I was also intimidated by that tenured professor positioned behind piles of books who seemed to want me to feel panic-stricken. But there were also wonderful moments. I impressed some with the syllabi I had brought along and the plans I had designed for research programs. Many individual conversations with young faculty members were positive, and I connected so well with one student that she hugged me when I left.

I do not really know how much interest there was in my candidacy among the committee. Maybe I was on the job market too soon. This is all hard to know. I can say that I got the distinct impression that they were interested in someone who had done more recent fieldwork. Perhaps the preferred candidate is also a graduate student mother. Next time, if there is another interview, I will most likely not reveal myself as a mother at all. Although there could have been a million reasons this job went to someone else, I cannot help but go back to that moment when they questioned my reluctance to do fieldwork.

If we are serious about supporting the careers of mothering women in academe, we must revisit who we want to hire and why. If we want to support only scholars who can defer, or even abandon, their dreams of having children, we should continue as we are. If we want change to happen, we need to welcome mothers differently. We need to make departments more open, accessible and friendly in order for mothers, and their families, to become more comfortable with job interviews and universities. When I arrived at the interview, I was already intimidated and scared; being nervous about nursing and managing the children did not help. At the end of the second day, I was exhausted and frustrated with the intimidating tenured men who grilled me, and instead of trying to nurse the baby privately, I sat in those windowed seats outside of the department, where the students sometimes gathered, and nursed her. The department never offered to pay for my travel costs, and I was too embarrassed to ask.

I struggle to recognize the much more complicated set of expectations that lead mothers to feel as if they must choose between raising children and having an academic career. Only six students registered for my spring term class this year, and when it was cancelled, I realized that I would earn only half of the six thousand dollars I had hoped to make this year. I try not to blame myself for attempting to schedule an evening class when my husband would be home for childcare, and I try to recognize the deeper structural components that make it difficult, or perhaps impossible, for many maternal scholars to succeed. The forms of subtle discrimination in the academy—what Beard labels “microdiscrimination”—is difficult both to recognize and to change. It is hard to mea-

sure and subtle enough, as she points out, to lead to a “bias avoidance” (147), where mothers do not feel comfortable asking for the accommodations that they might need. I was given an academic interview with time in the schedule to nurse my child but no comfortable place to do so. I felt that a request for a place to nurse would have been unwelcomed.

At least I had one interview, I often think. It was, of course, a good experience to be one of the final three candidates for a much-coveted position. But it made me long even more for a secure job in a friendly and interesting department, where feminist discussions abound, where colleagues read my work and comment on it, where students come by to an actual office for office hours, where there is time and space to prepare my lectures and grade papers, and where children are nearby and welcome. I would like to start a cooperative preschool for graduate student mothers who need to finish their dissertations, a faculty lounge where tenured mothers would provide mentorship to graduate student mothers, and a support group where students can exchange interview suits with attached notes about how to get breast milk out of them.

I agreed to write a book review for the department chair who interviewed me. Two months later, I sent it in. It is difficult for all mothers to juggle everything. I scanned the book as best I could and wrote the review late at night, lying on my side and nursing my daughter.

Even now, as I am typing this account of my campus visit, she is asleep on the bed next to me. I could leave and go back to my desk, but I would risk waking her, and I might have to come and nurse her soon anyway. Her right hand is resting on my arm while I type, as if it comforts her to know I am close by. She is especially beautiful when she sleeps.

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