

(Re)Turning to Motherhood and Academe

An Autoethnographic Account

Women attempting to balance childcare with work of tenure-track academic positions continue to face many barriers related to the ambiguous nature of tenure and promotion policies, the lack of personal and professional support as well as persistent strains related to role conflicts that emerge from demanding academic schedules in higher education (Ward and Wolf-Wendel “Academic Motherhood: Managing Complex Roles”). Although a growing documentation of these processes and their consequences for academic mothers or mothers who are also academics do exist, narratives of the struggles, tensions and possibilities for overcoming these processes remain under-researched and not well understood. The objective of this article therefore is to explore the meanings, experiences, and challenges of academic motherhood and the ways in which these can be negotiated. Using an autoethnographic approach, the article delves into a critical reflection of the processes and dynamics that shape the contexts within which I return to academe after turning to motherhood a second time around. Reflections point to the socio-cultural and institutional bases of these strains and put forward viable and empowering ways in which can they be navigated.

Introduction

Although the number of women who mother while in academe has been steadily increasing over the past few decades (Wolf-Wendel and Ward “Academic Life”; Carless), growing apprehensions among scholars remain over the expectations of, contradictions within, and difficulties encountered in combining their professional and childcare needs (Williams; Greenberg). The exit of academic mothers from academe due to the tensions of merging related

roles is also an issue of major concern (Mason and Goulden). With parallel trepidation for the simultaneous ticking of the tenure and biological clock (Wolf-Wendel and Ward *Academic Mothers*), researchers relate such trends to the often competing, intensive, and unbounded nature of both mothering and professing (O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly). In her work *Academic Mothering and the Unfinished Work of Feminism*, Susan Brown also advances the view that such complexities are created by the highly individualized nature of academe and its troubling effects on the academic engagement and performance of women who mother while in the academy.

However, although the socio-cultural, discursive contexts and related complexities that structure the experiences of academic mothers are increasingly documented, many questions remain as to how they think about, negotiate, and frame their practice of academic mothering. It is within such scholarly contexts that researchers call for greater explorations on the experiences, challenges, and strategies of women faculty (Amer; Connelly and Ghodsee), that capture the nuisances and choices that encircle motherhood and academe. For O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly "it is important to understand more fully contemporary academic motherhood—the ideas, institutional assumptions, and organizing systems that shape academic women's understanding of motherhood within academia—and mothering—a woman's desire to mother and her actual practices of mothering" (4). Where the voices of academic mothers are rarely taken notice of (Connelly and Ghodsee), the need for greater interrogation, understanding, and disclosure of that narrative remains.

The objectives of this article are therefore threefold. The article (i) explores the social and cultural perceptions of academic motherhood; (ii) examines the impact of these meanings on academic and maternal practices; and (iii) presents strategies for overcoming the challenges associated with working within these two spheres of influence. By reflecting on the processes by which I have returned to motherhood at a point when my research and writing have started to take form, I confront the socio-cultural bases of the tensions that emerge and analyze their impact on negotiating my return to motherhood while journeying as an emerging academic in the Caribbean. It is also my hope that such musing will provide much needed insights into the experiences of mothers in academe; an experience that is often overlooked and not well understood.

The paper is organized as follows: (i) a brief examination of the pertinent literature and scholarship surrounding existing understandings of academic motherhood; (ii) a justification for and benefits of autoethnography for storying the challenges of balancing motherhood and academe; (iii) a disclosure and discussion of the institutional and socio-cultural bases of these binds, and; (iv) the teasing out of strategies that can sustain healthy and empowering experiences for academic mothers.

Review of Related Literature

The challenges of combining a career in academe with motherhood have been well documented over the past couple of years (Mason and Goulden; Rosser and Taylor; O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly; Harper et al.). Indeed, the unbounded nature of these domains, the clash between notions of the ideal worker and mother as well as the institutional norm of disembodiment intensifies the challenges of balancing the two (Williams; O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly). In her seminal work *Unbending Gender*, Williams argues that the ideal-worker norm rests on an unrealistic assumption that workers are encumbered and that their families should operate around those normalized notions. Where gender ideology and division of labour stand at the heart of these troubling work standards, this view of the ideal worker remains therefore continually at variance with the norm of the selfless or sacrificial mother (Hughes; Swanson and Johnston). This situation is particularly problematic and frustrating for academic mothers who suffer from susceptibility to the cultural demands of motherhood and from the inherent contradictions and threats to their own identity that the integration of academic motherhood brings (Swanson and Johnston; Goode).

Another contentious issue that arises out of these discussions is whether academic mothers must choose between academic activities and those related to mothering, prioritize one over the other, or use the assumed academic flexibility, in whatever amount available, to balance the often conflicting and demanding tasks of motherhood and academe. Thus on the one hand, some researchers stress the complexities and problems of balancing motherhood and academe (Drago and Colbeck; Swanson and Johnston). On the other hand, other authors draw attention to the positive prospects and strategies for integrating the two (Evans and Grant; Mason and Ekman). In adopting a middle of the road position within such contestation, Connelly and Ghodsee posit that although it is "hard to achieve success in the academy ... it is not impossible" (11) as "there are many women in the academy who have successfully combined the two" (3).

In considering the possibilities for success, other scholars in the field also call for greater consideration of the presence or absence of family-friendly policies, the discourses that frame these, the degree of utilization of these policies, and the extent to which these policies are instituted and supported. Other concerns related to the role of agency in the process (that is, making the choice to have or not to have children during the tenure process) as well as the collective effects on the ways in which academic mothers negotiate the tensions between work and family domains also surface in these discussions (Phillipsen; Wolfinger and Goulden). However, given the persistence of existing

contestations in the literature, I am making a case for continued research on the thinking and practices of academic mothers to better discern the factors, dynamics, or conditions in which academic mothers work between the two. It is here that this article hopes to make a contribution.

Method

As a form of constructive inquiry, autoethnography delves into matters of and reflections on the social self; that is, how culture (re)shapes our experiences (Ellis and Bochner; Denzin and Lincoln). As a research method, autoethnographers use memory to critically reflect, assess, and make sense of the social nature of one's personal experiences (Chang). Embracing a postmodernist aspect of this method, therefore, helps to interrogate the cultural, structural, and ideological impact of certain norms and expectations on our own experiences.

My story is one of a mother of three, with an eleven-year-old daughter and my four-months-old twins, a boy and a girl. I am also a Caribbean migrant who moved from St. Lucia (located east of Barbados) to the more southern islands of Trinidad and Tobago (located north of Venezuela). Initially, I moved there to complete my doctoral studies in sociology. I have since remained, first, because of a job offer from a local university and subsequently, as a result of a second marriage to a native, who is also an academic at another regional university in Trinidad and Tobago.

For the past eight years, I have started an academic career within an education institute at a young, non-tenure university, with a heavy concentration on the teaching and training of in-service and pre-service teachers. Although the university is just over ten years old and lacks any formal policies for tenure and promotion, faculty members remain subjected to assessment regimes, which demand high levels of productivity across teaching, research, and community service spheres.

Since my entry into academe, I have entered into a professional learning trajectory that forces me to assess the social, institutional, and personal issues that affect my ability to negotiate mothering and professing. The recent birth of my twins has intensified these evaluative moments. I use the intricacies of autoethnography to reflect on what Ellis, Adams, and Bochner call *facets of cultural experiences* and to extend their work by unpacking the myriad of ways in which my socio-cultural backgrounds continue to influence my engagement with academe and motherhood. To do this, I combine the use of personal memory (identification of major events, their significance) with that of self-observation and self-reflection. Reflections were captured through the use of journaling over three months to record my thoughts on the experiences of motherhood after the birth of my twins and the implications

for my intended return to academe six months after the start of maternal leave. Although I am aware that this approach requires “multiple layer of consciousness” (Denzin and Lincoln, 739) that may produce inherent vulnerabilities associated with self-disclosing (Ellis and Bochner), I embrace the possibility that using an authentic voice can enrich discussions on the prospects for survivability, negotiability, and sustainability.

Confronting the Mêlée

In facing the *mêlée*—the conflicts associated with bridging the spheres of mothering and professing—I continuously grapple with powerful structures or institutions and cultural processes that simultaneously frame my own experiences and/or ability to work within the domains of work and family. When frictions emerge out of clashing social and cultural frameworks, I am also compelled to come to terms with the paradoxes of being an academic mother. I, however, use these moments as reflective opportunities whereby I can critically weigh in on the options for alternative action.

“Easier said than done” is an old adage that captures the breadth and depth of the gains, strains, and contradictions that have shaped my experiences so far. To be an academic mother with three children means having to rearrange my time, redirect my energies and increase my efforts at finding viable alternatives for balancing my family and work-related roles rather than choosing one over the other. Before the arrival of the twins, the idea of a balance or achieving some measure of a workable equilibrium seemed quite feasible. Of course, all of these plans depended heavily on the assumption that I would have some degree of influence over the dynamics within which I would engage; this conjecture would prove faulty.

The situation was also far more complex. With the coming of my twins, the conscious decision to supplement the use of formula with breast milk for the first six months, the reality of having few family members around, and the growing inability to do anything outside of caring for the children for the first month, I began to rethink my plans for writing within the first few months of their lives. Thus, approximately one month after the birth of my twins, that is, on February 20, I penned the following in my post-pregnancy journal:

I am up for a 2:00 a.m. feed. I start with breastfeeding one and allow my husband to bottle feed the other with the hope that I will switch for the next feeding time. It is now 4:30 a.m., my son is asleep, so too is his dad, but I am still up with my baby daughter and honestly I have no clue what time I will go to bed. I do hope that it is before my son awakes for his next feed. With that in mind, I try rocking her

with the hope that she will fall asleep soon. While pacing the living room, I cannot help but think of how this will all affect my academic work load, progress, and overtime plans.

At that very moment, I thought about the requirements for nurturing and caring for the twins, my older preteen daughter, *and* for sustaining the frequency and intensity of my research agendas. I also reflected on the intensity of caring for the twins and what that would mean for me and my performance as an academic. I mulled then at the idea of taking a personal sabbatical. In so doing, it was clear that there were no regrets concerning the decision to bring forth another child (although I actually got two). At that time (when I initially thought about returning to motherhood), I consciously acknowledged the need to stabilize my own academic productivity with that of being reproductive and family oriented.

In locating such a position of “inbetweenity,” I acknowledged then the significance and impact of my own religious and social upbringing on my decision of when and why I should return to motherhood. In that regard, I saw the act of bearing children under the institution of marriage as a central religious message and an expectation that resonated with my second marriage. In this sense, motherhood is socially scripted as a feminine imperative supported by biblical interpretations; a notion accepted by many of my close friends and family members. However, although I support the notion that mothering as a practice becomes a translation of the moral representations of oneself (May; Brock), I adopted a position of respect and tolerance for the religious beliefs or groundings of my family, the close knit orientation of my relatives, and that of my childhood church community. At the same time, I also understood the individual desires of my partner to have children of his own and the need for me to adjust my own scholarship amidst these emerging circumstances.

Now, I do concede that such a middle-of-the-road position introduces a certain level of ambivalence and to some extent intensifies the tensions that accompany this need to strike a balance. Working within these spaces of tensions has been full of paradoxes. Thus, as I attempt to work with some of the expectations of motherhood and to take pleasure in watching my babies grow, I also come to terms with my reduced levels of academic productivity and the disadvantageous academic position that I now occupy. In that regard, I am mindful of the observation that being a mother to young twins has increasingly affected my use of time and my ability to draw on the already-limited time to engage in some degree of academic work while I care for them. Between the feedings and the long hours spent soothing them, I really have no time. Any time is their time. So I wrote on March 1:

The kids are nearly two months old but the intensity of caring for them hasn't really subsided. I am still up every two hours at nights; rotate my time with them in between and barely get time to care for myself during the day, far less to do anything else. I rush to get something done while they are asleep but those times aren't even guaranteed as they occasionally surprise me with a cry or two for help. They call for my presence. Have I forgotten what is involved in caring for a baby? Am I expecting too much too soon or am I carrying the burden of my career concerns on my experience of being a mother a second time around? Ummm, perhaps it all of the above....

Such difficulties were also compounded by the constant reminder (from close friends and family members) of the need to provide primary care and to secure a maternal bond that nothing else or no other person could offer. On one specific occasion, a close relative uttered: "kids are more attached to their mothers so you can more easily pacify them when they cry than their fathers." Although I do not subscribe to these beliefs and support the need for paternal involvement in childrearing, I recognize that in the Caribbean, these internalized socially-constructed imperatives for mothering remain deeply seated in the legacies of early colonial and patriarchal systems that continue to shape gender roles and identity (Black-Chen). What remains is the understanding and acceptance that childbearing and rearing is a natural part of Caribbean women's lives (Barrow; Mohammed and Perkins). The paradox is that these cultural expectations coexist with the increasing participation of women in the labour market, albeit a market persistently segregated along sex lines (Seguino; Massiah). In such ambiguous contexts, I also take in the weight of these cultural expectations, the social justifications that encircle these, and their collective impact on academic mothers in such patriarchal contexts.

Moving Forward

Although the struggle for balance among academic mothers remains contentious, many prospects for integration exist (Connelly and Ghodsee; Ward and Wolf-Wendel "Choice and Discourse"). In moving forward, I continue to deliberate over the need to strike a balance between what is best for all concerned. Here, I acknowledge the understanding that entering into such a perfect storm and aspiring for some notion of a balance remains a problematic one (O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly; Mason and Ekman). At the centre of this conflict is the issue of prioritization: when, where, how, and why should we prioritize academic mothers. The normative or expected answer is that we must choose one over another. In resisting this stance, I embrace a more flexible

view that supports the need to prioritize when necessary (based on the weight of the related demands from the respective domains) and in other times, to strike a sustainable balance between the two roles. This sense of fluidity is also consistent with research findings that point to the ways in which many other academic mothers embrace some degree of changeability that helps them work between their professional and personal life (Collins). To achieve some level of balance between my roles of a mother and academic, I use and benefit to some extent from a myriad of social structures and processes. These include my connection with professional and social networks, the use of daycare services provided by a nearby registered centre, and the occasional use of introspection as periods of reflection.

Professional Networks

Professional networks provide a useful strategy for women desiring success while in academe (Buller; Connelly and Ghodsee). As part of two informal networks of professional women in higher education—Caribbean Educators’ Research Initiative (CURVE) and Researchers in Education, Network, and Dialogue (FRiENDS)—I have (i) received space for cross-institution, cross-discipline and cross-racial collaboration; (ii) accessed mentoring in writing, researching, collaborating, and publishing; (iii) received ongoing social support during that process; (iv) attended more conferences; (v) learned other related skills such as writing grants, delivering workshops, and preparing book proposals, and; (vi) found avenues for working outside the norms and constraints of academe while simultaneously increasing my productivity. This experience is of particular significance given my experience in a young national university, which lacks guidelines and processes for tenure or promotion.

Despite the social capital gains from these networks, I acknowledge that at an institutional level my experiences as an academic mother are also controlled by the growing demands for standardized performance assessments combined with that of neoliberal calls for accountability, productivity, effectiveness, and credibility within higher education (Careless). This is also coupled with the lack of family-friendly policies and social-support systems within the university in general. As an emerging scholar within an institutional context, I am also subjected to contradictions and inconsistencies that lie between the process of commodifying higher education and that of indigenizing; developing a curriculum that suits the cultural, socio-political, and economic realities of Trinidad and Tobago. These inconsistencies engender a growing sense of apprehension particularly when demands for productivity do not come with increased institutional support for scholarly activities and transparent promotion practices.

Social Support

Social support —phone calls, extended stays, Skype, ooVoo video chat, and Google hangouts—from close family, particularly close friends and family also serve as a useful source of intervention. Thus, despite living and working in St. Lucia, my mom for instance, frequently visits to provide needed help with the day-to-day management of the twins and other related tasks. My husband also plays a critical role in making sense of this all. As an academic and a first-time father, he is also fully engaged in an active work life based around his love for sports and his commitment to the scholarship of sports sociology. On many levels therefore, he understands the impact of having children at this point in our professional lives. Although this concern is an ongoing one, he remains generally supportive of my research agenda. As I wrote on February 27:

Another sleepless night. I have twin two at this time—my son. Although he is not so much of a fussy baby, he surely loves bodily contact. So I grant him that; I hold him against my chest and he sleeps but I wait another thirty minutes before laying him down with the fear that he may wake again. It is during these thirty minutes that I take time to admire him, to appreciate my blessings; a moment to give and to receive. It is then that I remind myself of the challenges and sacrifices ahead.... Indeed, dealing with these challenges would involve some amendments, some reprioritizing of my academic plans, and some creative use of different strategies. This is something that requires not just will power but also support. I must admit, for now, I have that in my husband. He usually wakes to help with or accompanies me during nursing moments or holds either baby as the need arises.... He has also taken up the task of dropping off my older daughter to school and picking up her on afternoons. These actions I truly appreciate as dealing with the twins and an older daughter requires some management of our time and sharing of responsibilities.

His status as a first time father and his caring nature also make these dynamics workable. This cooperation allows us to share, with much enthusiasm, the observation of milestones and periods of transition. It also enables a casual shift from discussions over the welfare and the growth of the children to the status and dynamics involved in pursuit of scholarship. On the other hand, his novice status as a father, and usual critical sense as an academic, also comes with a few restrictions in so far as I have to justify certain actions as it relates to the twins. At these times, I make a conscious choice as to which battles to take on and which ones to let go. I also remind myself that he too is experiencing his own learning curve relating to fatherhood.

In *Outlaw(ing) Motherhood*, O'Reilly insists that the challenge for theorists and activists of maternal empowerment is to “affirm the necessary work of social reproduction ... while at the same time insisting that culture, which

includes fathers, must likewise assume responsibility for reproductive labour” (28). I also assert that such transformation requires some consideration of the psycho-social conditions and situational circumstances that shape the thinking and practices of fathers in certain contexts. Outside of early anthropological research (1950s-1970s) on the Caribbean, which was defined by monolithic and functionalist understandings of the family, the Caribbean remains an open and unexplored scholarly space as it relates to fatherhood and the cultural norms that surround the thinking and practices therein. Where gendered and deep-seated patriarchal relations in the household are present, then, this would also necessitate some complex negotiations between partners and within households (Baker). Indeed, these forms of social support remain critical for professional advancement (Saunders, Therrien, and Williams). In integrating the personal and the professional, Buller also supports the need for academics to create or seek alternative career paths that deviate from institutional models. This continues to be a significant dynamic that is under-researched, particularly in societies like the Caribbean, where there is an absence of research that captures the dynamics of institutional cultures that shape academic experience and any formalized advocacy for academic mothers.

Daycare Services

I must admit that I have fears and harbour some guilt based on my growing attachment to my children and my own internalization of the discourse that surround understandings of the bond between a mother and her child. For now, as an academic mother, I make use of a registered childcare facility that helps me to better manage conflicting and demanding tasks related to academe. I am aware of the wider perception, however, at the local level, that the use of a daycare facility is seen as less desirable than the care offered by the mother. I recognize that these views are tied to the social construction of the responsibilities of the good mother, expectations of sacrifice and devotion, and the growing justifications of the need for mother-child attachment based on the prospects for enhancing the health and social well-being of the children. I also note the many reservations around the issue of using paid childcare and the consequence of these on women who sacrifice their success at work to maximize the responsibilities in the home (Williams *Reshaping the Work and Family Debate*).

While I comfort myself with evidence showing the long-term benefits of caretakers (Swanson and Johnston), I still take notice of the ways in which the need for balance increases the tensions between maternal and professional sustainability. Hence, even as I write this, I am also troubled by my upcoming lecture in the evening program for part-time students and the lack of evening

care (or even immediate assistance from family), which is needed to execute this teaching assignment with some peace of mind. I am also disheartened that despite the absence of family-friendly policies at my centre, the following trends occur regularly: (i) there is little consideration is given to the challenges faced by academic mothers with children; (ii) there is a general failure to move away from decision making based on the whims or predispositions of those in charge, and; (iii) senior administrative personnel and other colleagues, particularly women, have not identified with the value of resisting disembodied notions of academic scholarship. As a result, academic mothers, like me, are disadvantaged because they cannot negotiate for alternate options that would secure them more flexibility to successfully perform both roles.

The emphasis is on the need to provide accessible courses and flexible times to students based on traditional understandings of the physical classroom rather than on the need to provide programs that complement the family structures and processes, be it for students or staff. This lack of flexibility and openness on the part of those who shape the teaching schedules within the institution, (both male and female faculty) and those who can make help accommodate academic mothers in similar situations is one that remains unquestioned and under-theorized in such context. This troubling situation can be likened to what Williams and Segal identify as experiencing a maternal wall that emerges when a woman seeks a modified schedule before or after pregnancy. Although existing theories links these academic experiences to the presence of gendered structural barriers, little research has addressed the persistence of such cultural and at times institutionalized thinking among administrators and academic colleagues, the gendered nature of these differences, and the implications for maternal scholars. More research is also needed on the underlying structures of academic and gendered norms (Morrisey and Schmidt) that operate even at the organizational levels. In this case, the socio-political contexts remain central to the parameters that frame my coping strategies. This is a visible empirical gap in organizational literature.

Introspection

As major advocates for autoethnography as a qualitative method, Bochner and Ellis posit that it shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live and what their struggles mean” (111). In many ways, this critical self-reflection has been empowering. I have teased out the complexities of my identity in relation to others and to the cultures that have informed my own thinking and practice as an academic mother. One end result of this process is that I have begun to also examine in greater detail the role of my inner strength, determination, and tolerance for difference in this process of

negotiation. I am aware that this state of mind may result in many sleepless nights, social rejection at times, feelings of frustration, tiredness and perhaps even an occasional sense of feeling overwhelmed. With that, I note the need to contend with close relatives who promote sacrificial mothering practices, whether stated or implied, and at times to engage in this practice as an attempt to defuse a situation of mounting tension.

I also contend that achieving some degree of balance between mothering and professing as a form of a third space, particularly with young children, remains a moving target that has to be continuously (re)negotiated, (re)defined, and (re)positioned. As I prepare for my return to academe in the coming weeks, I attempt to form a sense of self that internalizes yet simultaneously resists the good mother discourse. This for me requires a continuous need to (re)think and (re)position my own maternal thinking and practices to align them with what my professional life requires and vice versa. Although I am aware of the hegemonic ideologies and misunderstandings of academic mothers, I also see this middle-of-the-road position as necessary given the need to calm the many social and professional tensions that can emerge from such contexts. This type of “inbetweenity” I see as a fragile and fluid process with no absolute outcomes and where there is a need to present a mask of motherhood that is loosely fused with that of academe. This is I perceive, not at a mark of weakness or a deficit, but as a mark of inner strength and personal growth. Although this type of ambivalence is not the main objective of the paper, it is certainly one that also requires greater theorizing.

Conclusions

Even though the notion that mothering supersedes that of professing is a widely held one, the idea that women can strike a balance between the two is still widely dismissed. These doubts that emerge out of the growing volume of literature point to the clashing norms of motherhood and academe, which shape the troubling experiences of mothers in the professoriate (Swanson and Johnston; Mason and Ekman; O’Brien Hallstein and O’Reilly). But mothering while professing is not an impossible task (Swanson and Johnson; Connelly and Ghodsee). The objective of the paper was to question the extent in which the norms of motherhood shape one’s engagement with academe and to deepen the understanding of the fluidity the surrounds negotiating the practices of academic mothering.

Using an autoethnographic approach, my reflections have highlighted the need to navigate multiple expectations, discourses, identities, biases, and challenges related to socially acceptable and institutionalized norms surrounding motherhood and academe. The use of this method has demonstrated not only

the persistent and troubling nature of these idealized norms but also the need to be resourceful in surviving these intricacies. In essence, this chapter typifies a story of reflection, connection, construction, reconstruction, and ongoing transformation. Although my insights cannot be extended or generalized beyond the experiences described in this personal narrative, they become useful in centring explicit knowledge and practices, particularly for others who may be able to connect to similar experiences. It is with such an understanding of this dynamic process that I support the need for more fluid theorizing, negotiating, networking, and enacting that can enhance and sustain the ways in which women within higher education think about and practice academic motherhood.

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