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Are You Looking for Madame or Maman? Role Playing the French Professor and the Mother in Academia

Since becoming a parent, the last six years have been the most exhilarating and exhausting in the personal and professional spheres of my life. My heart was brimming with love following the birth of my first daughter while my brain was sending me stress signals to begin preparing for a tenure-track position in French at a small liberal arts college the next month. After the birth of my second daughter, and a year marked by injury, illness, and applying for tenure, I began to feel a growing sense of urgency to connect with other academic mothers.

In this article, I share my personal journey as a female academic and mother with the aim of contributing to a wider discussion about maternal health and parenting in the academy. I reflect on the tensions originating from the roles I inhabit as both professor and mother—roles that have appeared to be at odds with one another from my job search through the tenure process. I have come to realize that I am happiest when I am able to see the various facets of my identity overlap in ways that invite knowledge and experience to nurture each other. I have sought to make my dual roles as professor and parent visible to my students by narrating various experiences raising my daughters in a bilingual home, by bringing my daughters regularly to campus, and by living in France together as a family while working with study abroad programs.

Vignette: The Job Interview

It was a three-and-a-half-hour white-knuckle journey. I was driving a little blue car through the falling snow amid SUVs and semis on my way to the second of four campus interviews. Too stressed to embrace the beauty that the

white snow brought to the gray flatlands of northern Indiana and southern Michigan, I gripped the steering wheel tighter, my thoughts spiraling like panicked snowflakes caught in the Arctic wind. The road before me felt unsettlingly familiar. Commutes had been an irritating part of my routine as a visiting assistant professor, though not as troubling as the signs of psychological burnout I was harbouring after multiple seasons of my life lost to the job market. Thankfully, the support and flexibility of my colleagues had enabled me to teach my French courses Monday through Thursday. Each Thursday night for three semesters, I had eagerly driven two hours across Indiana to spend the weekend with my husband, who was finishing his doctoral coursework, and each Sunday afternoon I had reluctantly driven the two hours back. The hours I had clocked on the road piled up in my head like wobbly pieces of a Jenga tower. I often spent that time behind the wheel worrying about my lack of job stability and strategizing about future career plans. But that chapter of our lives had ended, and we were once again living in the same city as he began preparing for his comprehensive exams. I remembered how the setting sun was always framed in the rear window on my return drives Sunday, the flamboyant symbolism causing my heart to sink, slipping into hibernation with a silent scream—wait, just wait, it’s only temporary. It is amazing what the mind can push the body to accomplish with the beguiling words that the pain is ephemeral, that life will get easier.

Focus on the interview. Should I practice explaining my research interests again? Would I succeed in connecting with the students during my class demonstration? How would I get through all those interviews without someone noticing? Yet even though it terrified me, the thought that I was not going through the campus interview alone also grounded me: my baby was with me. What did it really matter if I did not get the job? I was four months pregnant with my first child and was about to find out if “ghost baby” was a boy or a girl. I tried to channel my excitement and the second trimester surge of energy I was feeling towards the gruelling two days ahead. My identities as professor and mother already felt at odds. Was it misleading not to mention I would be giving birth one month before starting this tenure-track position? I was putting my mind on display during the interview—hoping my body, especially my swelling belly wrapped snugly in the last pair of dress pants that fit, would pass unnoticed. I knew that having only a month to recover from childbirth, move to a new state, and prepare classes would be rough. But I am a hard worker, and I felt so lucky for the timing: a July due date was the last month of my pregnancy window for that summer. Anyway, who knew if my job situation would be any more stable the following year? I was fortunate to have a visiting position rather than to be adjuncting. My husband and I now lived in the same city, an emotional triumph in itself, and interviews had been going well. Maybe interviewing with an all-female French department would

work in my favour, I thought, as my focus returned to avoiding sliding into the semi in front of me.

Merging the Parent Track and the Tenure Track: Building Bridges

Since becoming a parent, the last six years have been the most exhilarating and exhausting in the personal and professional spheres of my life. My heart was brimming with love following the birth of my first daughter while my brain was sending me stress signals to begin preparing for a tenure-track position the following month. In spite of the anxiety and guilt I experienced early on when leaving my daughter for campus each day, my perspective on the world had changed. I felt deeply joyful for the opportunity to continue doing what I had loved most for the past decade—teaching French language and literature—while also growing in my new role as parent. In some ways, these sentiments resembled the highs and lows of the emotional roller coaster I rode while pregnant and on the job market. The future course of my life was wildly out of my control, yet I was able to tap into a sense of tranquility in thinking about the new life developing in my body as I journeyed from interview to interview. Nearly six years later, I now have a second daughter who is two, and a year ago, I received the favourable news regarding my tenure application. The internal and external pressures in my daily life have only continued to increase from year to year, and many days, I sense that my precariously balanced schedule might collapse if one more item is thrown on top. Despite these tensions, I have also developed more confidence in the coping strategies I have learned, the most basic of which is to be present in the moment, attending to each day with gratitude.

In this article, I reflect on the rewards and challenges I face as a female academic and parent sharing my time between professional development and family life. In particular, I consider why maternal health and wellbeing in the academic workplace appeared to me as elusive ideals towards which I seemed always to be grasping only to emerge empty handed. I will discuss the pressures that parenting places on a dual-academic couple, my desire to see university policies put into place that more fully support motherhood, and several positive experiences I have had in which my roles as parent and professor have been able to intertwine. What does it look like to play the roles of both the professor (“Madame,” the term my French students use when addressing me) and mother (“Maman” to my daughters), and how can I be authentically engaged in each of them?

To be honest, I have been so completely immersed in the day-to-day struggle of staying afloat in academia and caring for small children that, until recently, I had not been able to give myself the time or space to process how I have been approaching these roles. It is certainly ironic, though perhaps also fitting, that

this issue of maternal health and wellbeing coincides with a global health pandemic during which the boundaries between the roles that mothers assume in their families and in their jobs have imploded. COVID-19 has brought to the forefront a real sense of urgency to the issue of maternal wellbeing, as many mothers have taken on additional responsibilities of childcare and education while also working from home. Andrea O'Reilly has aptly noted that during this pandemic, the work and stress mothers experience have risen exponentially yet remain largely invisible. Sharing our experiences as mothers, though, is one way to render mothering more visible. The reflections in this article predate my experiences teaching remotely during the coronavirus pandemic. On many levels, however, they echo similar emotional responses of frustration, isolation, and uncertainty—all of which I have surely struggled with during the past few months of confinement. My hope is that this narrative resonates with the experiences of others and contributes to a broader conversation regarding maternal health and wellbeing.

In response to the sense of isolation I felt during the months directly after the birth of my second daughter, I decided to seek out the stories of other mothers in academia. I began spending my evenings and nursing sessions reading the narratives in Elrena Evans and Caroline Grant's *Mamma PhD*, Rachel Connelly and Kristen Ghodsee's *Professor Mommy*, Lynn O'Brien Hallstein and Andrea O'Reilly's *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context*, and Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro's *Mothers in Academia*. This encounter with an entirely new community of women's voices struck a chord with me and facilitated a surprisingly strong connection with women whom I had never met. It also reminded me that I have had several wonderful female role models as department chairs, dissertation committee members, and directors of study abroad programs. The encouragement from these women inspires me to engage with my students not just as a professor but also as a woman and a mother. Rather than silencing the female and maternal sides of my identity while on campus, I strive to give them a voice. This may be in the form of relating my lived experiences to literary or cultural topics the class is discussing, bringing my daughters to certain events on campus, or even bringing the family to France with me while I work with study abroad programs.

This is not my default mode: it is much easier for me to model the professor than the mother. The professor is cleaner, respected, and completely dedicated to their discipline. Indeed, the professor mystique seems to vanish when a baby is thrown into the mix. After all, the stereotypical image of the professor—tucked away in the office on campus or at home, reading books, delving into important research questions, writing or grading papers—never involves multitasking with a breast pump, a last minute outfit change due to a baby spitting up (oh no, not the beloved tweed jacket), or an interruption to

deal with a poopy diaper. I find that a male professor sharing pictures or anecdotes of his children renders him more human in a way that does not damage his intellectual persona but rather gives it a warmer hue. When a female professor does the same, however, there is a greater risk: her priorities are perhaps silently called into question, as if she could not inhabit both the ivory tower and the domestic sphere. These insecurities still linger in my mind, a generation after the women I view as role models fought their battles. Clearly, there is still more work to be done in normalizing mothering in academia. Yet by making both my roles visible and by being open about the tensions between them, I am affirming their joint value.

My ability to thrive professionally, however, has been dependent on the support of my partner. He is the “anchor parent” who stayed home with my first daughter the year I began the tenure-track position before we secured a place for her in daycare. Knowing that my baby was being well cared for in our home during my first months at the new job was integral to my establishing a sense of emotional stability and also to my ability to focus on my work. Over the past few years, when one of the girls was sick and had to stay home from daycare, he was the one to lose hours of work on his dissertation. We are fortunate that he will teach in the fall as a visiting assistant professor in the English department at my college after having adjuncted for several years while finishing his dissertation, although we are still unsure if a tenure line will open up and if he would be hired. He extended his years in the PhD program beyond his original plan to care for our children with limited support from his department (a doctoral fellowship the last summer and fall before his defence). He successfully defended his dissertation last December just before his PhD clock expired. Although his dissertation director was encouraging, there was no discussion within the graduate school about lengthening his timeline due to caregiving responsibilities. I am grateful for his sacrifices but anxious about his future job opportunities (within the academy or outside of it) in our rural setting. With student loans to repay, it would not be a viable option for him to stay home with the kids, nor is it what he desires. Perhaps, in the end, we will look back and be grateful that we were not both working towards tenure while raising two small children at the same time. Nevertheless, I find myself wanting more flexibility for accommodating work-family issues from both sides: the college where I work and the graduate school with which my husband was affiliated.

Family-friendly university policies needed at my workplace span paid maternity leave to creating nursing-friendly spaces on campus and including changing tables in bathrooms connected to event halls. I was assigned to a shared office my first year as a tenure-track professor, and when I vocalized my need for a private space to pump, I was given a key to a maintenance closet across the hallway. Naturally, I found the idea of maintenance workers banging

on the door while I was in there to be extremely alarming. I ended up sharing my concerns with my two male office mates and was able to secure the shared office at noon each day to pump. One of my office mates was a father of four and very sympathetic, although sometimes I would have to remind him it was noon, which, of course, could be a little awkward. I would put my “Office in use—please do not disturb” sign on the door and would sit frustrated in silence when the occasional student knocked. There are still numerous changes to be made in shifting academic mentalities towards a more equitable and holistic vision of the professor-parent. When my orientation week training began with a nine-to-four day without any breaks—which led to an engorged mama because I did not want to rock the boat on the first day—I knew it was not organized that way out of malice: it simply reflected the expectation that we be free from family constraints. After several rounds of mastitis during that year, I have been more diligent the second time around and have even pumped once in an open office at the Toledo Opera during a daylong excursion with students. I believe sharing experiences is a good first step towards widening the conversation, although for change to occur, I recognize that I need to voice my concerns on my campus and advocate for more women to become part of the administration, as Connelly and Ghodsee suggest.

Although I do not feel that I have hit the “maternal wall” that Joan Williams describes (qtd. in O’Brien Hallstein and O’Reilly 13), I agree wholeheartedly with O’Reilly that the model academic is still expected to be unencumbered by family life (10). I received praise for the “good timing” of my second pregnancy, as my due date was just after graduation in May. Actually, it is true that I had tried to time it that way in order to avoid having a discussion with the provost about taking time off as a junior faculty member, since there was, and still is, no paid maternity leave policy in place. Financially, I did not have much of a choice, since my husband was still writing his dissertation and his part-time monthly salary adjuncting was only enough to cover the daycare tuition for one of our daughters. As a result, I sacrificed a summer of research and teaching. I have taught a summer class on campus or in France almost every summer except for the two during which I gave birth. In the end, research deadlines ran up against my pregnancy clock: I spent the last few weeks of my third trimester writing a book review seated on an exercise ball, and on my official due date, I was revising article proofs of a second project rather than giving birth (the baby emerged nine days later). At the time, I had never heard of the idea of asking for a year off the tenure clock; instead, I had already asked for and received a two-year credit towards tenure from my years as a visiting professor. Fortunately, I am at a small liberal arts college where the primary focus is on excellence in teaching, followed closely by professional development and service. This was also a deliberate choice on my part; the second tenure-track offer I received my last year on the job market came from

a Research I university. Teaching is my first passion, and I have seized the opportunity to teach and work with study abroad programs in France nine of the last eleven summers. Although I have a couple of publications in my field and I regularly present at national and international conferences, it is hard for me to imagine how I would have measured up to the publication expectations at a Research I institution while also being on the parent track. But determination can go a long way, and pursuing a different job would have led to a whole different set of decisions on my part.

Although the college where I teach needs to implement more family-friendly policies (as I imagine is the case with most small liberal arts colleges), I appreciate that family life is valued by students and faculty, in part as a reflection of its conservative, Christian mission. A few times each semester, there are even activities for faculty and their children: nature games in the arboretum; brunch with Santa in the dining hall; an Easter egg hunt at a sorority house; craft and film night for kids so parents can go on a date; and kids' night at the sports complex. Both of my daughters have participated in child research studies through the psychology department. My five year old absolutely loves being on campus and seeing students. We have had some special mother-daughter dates, such as attending free cultural events, including performances by an all-female a capella group from Zimbabwe and ballets put on by the student dance troupe. I make it a point to show her that campus is a place that her mother loves, and I even manage to give her little glimpses into what I do in class. For example, I recorded a short video in French asking her to point to various body parts. I then showed the video in my introductory French class to help the students review for their quiz. My students seem to light up when I share an anecdote about my family life, and I overhear them telling stories about other professors doing the same. I quietly acknowledge the presence of the voice in my head telling me it would be wiser to present the cleaner image of the professor unimpeded by family life. In reality, a surprising number of my male colleagues have large families with four or more kids. Yes, many of their wives stay at home, and although it does not impact their work days in the same way—I have not yet observed a male colleague sporting a pump bag or complaining of back pain or swollen ankles from pregnancy—I see that they are loving parents who make a concerted effort to be engaged in their children's lives. They, too, struggle with the work-family balance, which is why we need to be framing future discussions in a way that invites fathers into conversations on caregiving.

How does one strive towards balance among the messy chaos? And where does wellbeing fit into the picture? Anne-Marie Slaughter emphasizes in *Unfinished Business* that each person inevitably has a tipping point that causes their work-life balance to collapse. For me, this seems to be when I or another family member is sick for an extended period. The year following the birth of

my second child, I constantly struggled to stay healthy, and I could not seem to carve out the time to reintegrate the regular exercise routine I had established after my first child. I barely managed to squeeze in two months of physical therapy appointments for an injured arm and shoulder into my workday, already shortened by having the girls in two different daycares. I remember sitting through sessions of the TENS machine, which delivered small electrical impulses to my damaged muscles, while trying to read the novels I was teaching in class—all the while wishing that I could hook something up to my brain and jolt it back into focus. Ironically, the bicep tear and tendinosis were caused in part by the overuse of my arm while nursing and poor form while carrying a baby in a car seat between the house and the car.

The winter break did not bring me closer to that equilibrium I hoped to achieve. Between semesters, I worked on my application for tenure through pinkeye, a sinus infection, and a massive cold. That spring semester leading up to and during spring break, I fell prey to influenza, then to a sinus infection, and finally to a stomach flu. Is this simply the price one pays for mingling in three different germ pools—two daycares and a college campus—or is this more telling of an underlying fatigue and burnout from the psychological stress of being reminded each day that you cannot do it all, professing or parenting, the way you had hoped? I recognize that perfection is unattainable; I try to make realistic goals. I have become far more efficient than I was before kids, but I still struggle to let go of projects and limit my involvement, even when I know it is what I need to do to stay healthy. Fortunately, my arm has now healed, and I am back to jogging and yoga. In other words, some of the time I had been spending nursing, I now spend exercising. I still ask myself: What could I have done differently during the year following the birth of my second child? Would having had maternity leave or a reduced course load in the fall freed up the time for the self-care that I needed? Perhaps. But I did not feel that I was in a position to be able to ask for this, given that this was the year I was applying for tenure. Even if a campus-wide policy was in place, would I have felt encouraged using it? This is where the cultural shift in mentality regarding working and parenting needs to occur. Professors are rewarded for caring about their students, but what about caring for their families and themselves? How can we imagine these care models working together?

I know that I am happiest when I see the overlap between work and family—two spheres of my life that can feel at odds with each other. One way that I have been able to reconcile them is by speaking French to my daughters and observing their dual-language acquisition. This has been a fun way for me to bring my passion for language into our everyday family life. Although my husband and I are not native speakers, we have both committed to raising our daughters bilingual, each of us speaking solely in French to them at home. I

learn something new from my daughters every day in this context. I remember my joy when, at age two, my oldest daughter started making word connections between the French she was learning at home and the English she was learning in daycare. She would say a word in French and then in English, gleefully exclaiming “*même chose*” (same thing). Having had her in France with me during three summers when teaching and working with summer study abroad programs, and giving her the chance to interact with the students during social activities, has been memorable for all involved. In this way, not only do the students witness how a second language can be a dynamic part of family life, they also get to see a wider picture of their professor’s identity, which allows them to grasp more fully how knowledge and experience inform each other. Last summer, my family of four spent two months in France while I researched, directed a study abroad program, and enjoyed family-life adventures. We created many special memories, such as when we celebrated my oldest daughter’s fourth birthday with two of my students at a gelato shop in record-breaking heat. The ice cream was melting almost as fast as we could eat it. And as we sat there sweating with colourful birthday hats topping our heads and singing “*Joyeux anniversaire*” (Happy Birthday), I could feel my heart swelling—not due to the heat but to my recognition of another small victory in blending work and family.

Vignette: Leaving Campus

I live only a ten-minute walk from campus; however, the year after the birth of my second daughter, I often asked my husband to pick me up at the end of the workday. My laptop, purse, pump bag, lunch sack, and coffee thermos were just too much to carry when I had to keep everything on one side of my body to allow the partial tear in my bicep muscle to heal. Although I felt in desperate need of exercise, when the little blue car—the same car I drove pregnant to the snowy interview years ago—would pull into the parking lot with my husband and two daughters in tow, a big smile would spread over my face. Then, the back window would roll down, and my eager three-year-old daughter would start screaming “*Maman! Maman! Maman!*” at the top of her lungs. Usually, these shouts drew the curious eyes of a student or colleague, and I would think of how odd it is to hear young children’s voices on a college campus. But these are my two worlds, and some days they blend together more harmoniously than others. When I would climb into the car, and my daughter would ask in her mixture of French and English, “*Maman, you travailler sur le campus? You enseigner your étudiants?*” (Mommy, you work on campus? You teach your students?), I would begin to tearfully laugh with gratitude for my daughter’s affirmation: I am both Madame and Maman.

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