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What Are We Trying to Build? Artist-Mothers in Academia on Creating Sustainable Careers

This article examines the unique challenges of motherhood in academia, advocating for distinguishing between fixed and malleable constraints while leveraging artistic thinking to develop proactive strategies for a more fulfilling academic life. From an artist's perspective, it argues that many constraints, often perceived as rigid, can be creatively reinterpreted and reshaped, empowering academic mothers to design their professional and personal experiences.

Drawing on a literature review, personal vignettes, and insights from artistic practices, the article explores how an artistic mindset can support the creative problem-solving needed to navigate intersecting identities. Much of academic life is shown to be malleable, like clay, allowing for adaptation in areas such as flexible scheduling, workload management, and household partnerships. However, certain aspects, metaphorically described as "rocks in clay," resist change, including the tenure clock, the availability of affordable childcare, and campus climate. Recognizing and understanding these fixed challenges enable informed decision-making and strategies to work around them.

The article concludes by summarizing key insights and advocating for an artistic approach to academic life that benefits not just mother academics but all scholars. Additionally, it offers institutional recommendations to enhance the adaptability of academic structures, contributing to the broader discourse on academic motherhood and providing actionable insights for supporting the success and wellbeing of mothers in academia across disciplines.

Introduction

This article explores the unique challenges of motherhood in academia to argue for distinguishing between fixed and malleable constraints and using artistic thinking to create proactive strategies for a more fulfilling academic life. Working in academia involves a complex array of overlapping and sometimes contradictory responsibilities. Much has been written about motherhood in academia, including a special issue of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* titled "Mothers in Academe" written in 2015 (volume six, issue two). This article synthesizes existing literature on academic motherhood, exploring how a creative approach to the challenges of working in academia can positively reshape the experience for mothers in the field. Through a review of current research, vignettes, and personal experiences, we examine the particular challenges faced by mother academics. From an artist's perspective, we suggest that some constraints in academic work are more malleable than they initially seem, allowing for re-interpretation and proactive change. By distinguishing between what is fixed and what can be reimagined, mother academics can design their experiences to foster sustainability and growth as artists, academics, and mothers.

Tallest Tower as a Metaphor

It is the first day of a general education (GE) art class, and students from various majors, many with little experience in art, gather in the university classroom. Tara distributes lumps of clay, each about the size of a softball. On the whiteboard at the front of the room are the directions: "Build the tallest tower."

Students approach the prompt differently: Some create blocks and stack them; others roll coils of clay and attempt to make them stand. Some build supports, and others build upwards, squeezing the clay into long, thin spires. A few students immediately become verbally competitive, playfully trying to outdo their peers, while others focus inwards and quietly experiment with the clay. After about fifteen minutes, Tara measures the towers with a yardstick to determine the tallest. Some are so spindly that they collapse almost immediately. But a winner is announced, followed by a round of applause. Tara then invites the students to observe each other's work, discussing different strategies and aesthetic qualities. She asks, "What have we learned about clay?" and students share their observations from the activity. Although height is the stated challenge, Tara's true goals are to engage students, spark creativity and curiosity, increase familiarity with the material, cultivate comfort in a new setting, and build classroom rapport.

In academia, the biggest implicit and explicit goal is achievement. Graduate students and early career academics often face pressure to "publish or perish." For assistant professors, achieving tenure requires demonstrating excellence in areas valued by their institution, such as maintaining a robust record of scholarly research or creative practice, excelling in teaching, and making significant service contributions (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). The competition can feel fierce, leading to a sense that one's work is "unbounded" (O'Reilly and Hallstein)—there is always more to do and never enough time to do it all. As we strive to meet these professional demands while balancing careers with family, community, and personal interests, a crucial question emerges: "What are we trying to build?" This article uses the metaphor of the "tallest tower" activity as a structure (pun intended) for creating a sustainable life as an artist, academic, and mother. It examines successes, challenges, and strategies for overcoming obstacles.

We begin with a survey of literature on academic motherhood. Then, we lean into our artist identities to explore how an artistic mindset can afford insight when applied to the creative problem of intersecting identities. We posit that much of academic life is malleable, like clay, and therefore open to creative adaptation. We explore malleable aspects, including flexible scheduling, workload management, and partnerships at home. However, we also compare some aspects of academic life to "rocks in clay" or lumpy, unworkable materials with little adaptability. Although having limited control in these areas can be frustrating, understanding these challenges can help us make more informed decisions and find ways to work around them. These unworkable aspects include the tenure clock and timing of children, availability of affordable daycare, and campus climate. The conclusion summarizes the key findings and insights and reiterates how approaching academic life with an artistic mindset can be beneficial to all academics, even those who are not in creative fields. We also present institutional recommendations that could improve the malleability of academic life for all academics.

Literature on Academic Motherhood

If the goal of the tallest tower activity is height and height alone, the best strategy is to build straight up with as little foundation as possible, pinching the clay impossibly thin at the top. This approach often wins the height competition but results in a tower that quickly topples. Students hold the tower steady until it is measured, after which it sags and collapses. An academic career modelled on this approach might prioritize the rapid accumulation of accolades—scholarly publications, conference presentations, art gallery exhibitions, grants, awards, etc.—at the expense of other aspects of life. This strategy might work for single academics with minimal family obligations or

fathers in normative relationships who "have a wife/partner at home, who will ensure that their family lives do not interfere with the normative expectations and demands of the profession" (Motapanyane and Dobson 130). However, even when the approach works, it still represents an unbalanced and, in many cases, unsustainable approach to an academic career—one valuing achievement above all else, and does not consider other responsibilities, identities, and desires.

Considerable research has examined the challenges mothers face in academia. Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro note: "The ideal of the supermom-employee-student is especially poignant in academia, where the existence of flexible schedules as well as extended winter and summer breaks creates the misinformed assumption that the demands of the academy are compatible with the demands of parenting" (2). While academia's flexible structure holds potential to be an ideal setting for mothers with childcare responsibilities, realizing this potential is challenging. The literature presents conflicting views on whether success in academia is possible or even desirable for mothers with caregiving responsibilities. For example, in frequently cited research, Mason and Goulden found that whereas most married males with small children achieve tenure, most women with tenure are unmarried and/or do not have children. Thus, academia may not be as supportive of mothers as it first appears.

The dual demands of motherhood and academia present unique challenges for building sustainable careers. This is particularly difficult in Western cultures that impose heavy expectations on mothers, described by BettyAnn Martin as an "oppressive litany of maternal labours" (11). Paired with the often unspoken "belief that one must constantly work (even during labour, childbirth, and recovery)" in academia (Pare 56), mothers can be stretched thin when they try to match expectations in both areas. Both societal expectations around caregiving and the pressure to be perpetually engaged in their work could negatively affect women's work-life balance and chances of tenure.

Academic expectations usually include teaching and mentoring, service to the university and the profession, and research (among others, which will be discussed later). Women, especially mothers, may feel a need to prove themselves and take on "more responsibility than required by … job descriptions just to keep the workplace running smoothly" (Summers and Clarke 239). Researchers have found that female academics are often assigned greater teaching and mentoring responsibilities than their male counterparts (Houpalainen and Satama; Martínez and Ortíz). And when time is limited, women tend to prioritize teaching over research (Hallstein and Hayden 175; Nelson and Combe 219). Perversely, faculty who engage more heavily with teaching and service "are penalized for engaging in those areas over research"

(Nelson and Combe 219). Burdened with these additional responsibilities, which are often devalued, women may find they have less time to engage in research or creative activities.

Research and creative work are inherently difficult: they are time-consuming, indirect, and often require outside funding. It can take years from conception to publication or exhibition. In contrast, students and service tasks are ever-present and demand attention. Women are socialized to notice and address these immediate needs. As Martin notes, an “ethic of care is encouraged by cultural representations that idealize maternal devotion and is enforced by social institutions that rely heavily on the benefits of unpaid labour” (14). These factors—including external and internal demands and the challenges of maintaining research momentum amid competing priorities—can limit women’s achievement and advancement in academia.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequities. Mary Friedman and Emily Satterthwaite note that it amplified the “historic inequality posed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood” (55). During the pandemic, women’s academic productivity plummeted while men’s productivity increased (Viglione). For example, in Mexican universities, 46 per cent of academic mothers reduced professional activities by approximately three hours daily during confinement (Martínez and Ortíz 158). Societal expectations exacerbated existing inequities: Whereas fathers were celebrated for pitching in, mothers were reminded of their shortcomings (Friedman and Satterthwaite 55). The impacts of COVID-19 can still be felt today, as the mental strain of managing family and professional responsibilities during the pandemic, paired with the loss of research time, has caused some women to fall behind in their academic milestones or leave academia altogether.

Despite the setbacks of the pandemic, there have also been hopeful developments for women academics in the last several years. Before the pandemic, younger generations of female academics were beginning to match and, in some cases, even outperform their male counterparts (Dapiton et al. 1427). Furthermore, researchers offered additional perspectives on how being a mother can positively affect careers in academia. Astrid S. Huopalainen and Suvi T. Satama. consider how motherhood can be “a transformative practice” that strengthens and develops mothers in their academic professions (102). Ethelbert P. Dapiton et al.’s research explores how parenting responsibilities may also serve as a moderating factor for research productivity and work-life balance. Artist mothers can support one another: When the pandemic caused lockdowns, academic mothers like Vanessa Marr responded by creating virtual communities for collaborative research and emotional support. These developments have brought new hope that academia is gradually becoming more inclusive to mothers.

Nevertheless, many challenges remain, and as women academics, we cannot ignore the systems we are embedded in. Especially with the ticking tenure clock, we cannot simply opt out of the game. But none of us aspire to careers resembling the spindly, easily toppled clay towers built by Tara's students. We do not want to sacrifice our personal lives and relationships for academic success. We seek satisfying and interesting jobs, close and supportive relationships, and the audacity to maintain identities outside work and home. An artistic lens helps us to build a life in academia that works for us.

Academic Experience as Malleable

Artists are creative problem solvers. The apparent incompatibility of intensive mothering and high achievement in academia is a puzzle that artists have approached from many different angles. In Sandra's experience, making space for her artistic work enhances her creativity in other areas of life and, thus, becomes a necessary component of balancing academia, work, and mothering rather than an added frill. Prioritizing her art allows her to approach personal and professional challenges creatively, viewing parenting, teaching, and research as opportunities for problem-solving. This practice primes her to see all aspects of her life—whether artistic, academic, or familial—as creative challenges that can be navigated with adaptability and innovation.

Artist and professor Beth Krensky describes how her artistic mindset helps her build an academic career that works for her: "It was my ability as an artist, a creative adapter, that allowed me to reframe my ideas of success. I decided that it was important to listen to myself, extend notions of time, and create work that still addressed important ideas yet did not always have to be so time intensive" (60). By redefining success on her terms, Krensky avoids the conflict between her roles as a mother and an academic. Similarly, Fleur Summers and Angela Clarke describe how, as artists, they "explore the in-betweenness of the many roles [they] play" (235). They embrace the interconnectedness of their roles rather than separating them; this fluid approach allows them to "forge an academic career and an artistic practice as well as raise a family" (238). These artistic perspectives offer unique insights that may alleviate some of the pressures women academics face.

As artists and academics, we seek to reframe our academic experiences as something malleable—like clay—that can be shaped and reshaped to fit our evolving needs throughout our careers and family lives. This creative approach involves both adapting our expectations and intentionally designing our paths. In the following section, we explore aspects of academic work, some more adaptable than others, and how these situations might be adjusted to better suit our needs. Research supports this view, showing that success for mothers in academia often stems more from their agency and choices than from

institutional support (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 11). Our goal is not just to survive the rigours of academic life but to find "satisfaction and success in all of [our] many roles" (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 1). Reframing and reshaping our experience makes that possible.

Flexible Scheduling

One of the most malleable aspects of academia is its flexible schedule. Academics are generally free to set their hours as long as they complete their work. Except for classes and meetings, work can be performed from anywhere at any time. This flexibility is often seen as "more conducive to family time than other career options" (Pare 59), offering a sense of control over when and where work happens.

However, flexibility has a downside. The lines between work, artmaking, and home can blur, complicating our understanding of what it means to successfully fulfill these demands as we navigate them (Saggese 6). Disconnecting from work when working from home can be especially difficult (Pare) because there is no distinct separation between work and personal life. And even when away from home, the ability to work anytime, anywhere, can lead to working all the time, everywhere. Audrey, for example, had to downgrade to a flip phone to resist the urge to check emails while commuting.

Academics often find that despite their flexible schedules, they lack the time they want to devote to scholarship, family, and themselves (Kuhl et al. 21). The same flexibility that feels like a benefit when a mother can be available for her children during the day feels like a burden when she is "up at 10:00 p.m. grading" (Carpenter Estrada 34). Furthermore, the blurred boundaries between work and home can increase the likelihood of work-family conflict (Wyatt-Nichol et al. 108). These challenges contrast with the type of fluidity and interconnectedness of work and home that Summers and Clarke advocate for. Fluidity between roles can allow academics to flow purposely between chosen priorities, but lack of boundaries leads to work taking over at the expense of everything else.

As authors, we frequently face the challenge of using flexibility well. At times, we have had to establish stronger boundaries around our work to protect our time. Other times, we have embraced late-night and early-morning work sessions as a conscious choice. For instance, while off contract during summer and winter break, with limited affordable childcare options, we worked on this paper during odd hours—early mornings, nap times, and late at night while our children slept. This choice of working times allows us more quality time with our families during the day.

Academic women often use their flexibility strategically to minimize friction between work and family life, such as working through lunch or starting later

to accommodate children's schedules (Walker 314). While these strategies can help in the short term, they can also lead to exhaustion, with little time for breaks and rest over the long term. Additionally, working outside traditional hours can leave mothers in academia feeling disconnected from colleagues, for example, missing out on informal interactions throughout the day. It is possible to feel grateful for the flexibility while feeling overwhelmed and isolated. Audrey shares her experience:

> I've been able to do a lot of work from home. I can attend faculty meetings on Zoom. I can hold office hours online. Some of my classes are online. I also control my schedule, scheduling my classes after my husband gets off his 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. job, so we might not need daycare. This has made breastfeeding very easy. It allows me to be home with my son Silas a lot, and I can work those odd hours, allowing me to spend a lot of time with him. However, working from home with a child isn't very productive and oftentimes only happens when he is sleeping or if my parents come to visit and watch him. And I often feel spread thin.

We have found that an artistic mindset helps us be more adaptable and creative in managing and scheduling our academic, artistic, and family priorities. Much like how we approach artmaking—where flexibility and experimentation are key—we have learned to weave our creative practices into our academic and personal lives. For example, we do creative work alongside our students to model being artists and teachers, and we create at home with and around our children to show them the importance of our artistic practice. Bringing our identities and their strengths to bear helps us address perceived institutional barriers (Hawkes et al. 236). Like artist and scholar Jorge Lucero, we see ourselves as "artists-in-residence" in our classrooms and homes. We "find unity between [our] different roles and responsibilities [by viewing] them all as part of [our] artistic practice" (Carpenter Estrada 39). Our output may not always be our "best" or "ideal" work, but this approach allows us to continue to create, especially when life's demands are at their highest.

However, we must be cautious not to let our work, even the work we are passionate about, consume all of our time and energy. We also need space and time in our schedules to be human and rest. Recognizing these needs requires a shift in how we view the demands of academia and motherhood. While the institutional expectation of being an "ideal worker" (O'Reilly and Hallstein 12) clashes with the cultural expectation of intensive mothering, which assumes "childcare work and domestic management [to be] solely a mother's responsibility" (Martin 11), part of approaching scheduling with an artist mindset involves recognizing these relentless expectations of work and mothering as unachievable and undesirable. We can use the malleable flexibility of

the academic profession to choose how we respond to cultural expectations—whether by meeting them, adjusting them, or defying them altogether in ways that better align with our values.

Workload Management

Mothers in academia often find it essential to "become more efficient and organized to get their work done" (Craft and Maseberg-Tomlinson 71). Balancing childrearing responsibilities forces mothers to clarify priorities and challenge prechild ideal worker norms (Chesser 33). As a result, many report improved time management and focus (Chesser 33). This shift, however, is about increased efficiency and reshaping how we approach and engage with academic work. An artistic mindset emphasizing process over product, intuition, and adaptability can offer a unique lens to navigate the inherent tensions of balancing diverse professional and personal workloads.

One challenge in prioritizing academic work is its multifaceted nature. Just as artists balance multiple projects and mediums, professors not only teach but also advise students, conduct research, present at conferences, serve on committees, and manage administrative duties. These tasks are all neverending and demand different, "often conflicting, skills and scheduling" (O'Reilly and Hallstein 20). Graduate students face similar demands, often juggling teaching, coursework, research, and thesis writing, with some, like Sandra, also balancing full-time jobs. Artist academics face an additional layer of complexity—engaging in creative work can include maintaining a digital presence and organizing gallery shows.

The concept of "satisficing," coined by Herbert A. Simon in 1981, offers a philosophical perspective to scale back expectations and to make these demands more manageable. Satisficing is when a person makes decisions that are "good enough" (though not necessarily optimal) given the context of time, resources, and other constraints (Simon 35). For mother academics, satisficing can be a necessary strategy to ensure that they meet their responsibilities without overextending themselves. The artist's mindset offers a helpful parallel: As artist Melissa Madonni Haims wisely notes, "Perfection is unachievable. Perfection is the enemy" (303). Just as artists embrace the inherent imperfections of their work, mother academics can accept the reality that "good enough" is the most sustainable and effective long-term approach.

Tara's career illustrates this shift in mindset. Early on, she would extensively rework classes each semester, adding and changing content to optimize the student experience. After her youngest child was born, this approach became unsustainable. Although she updates courses when necessary, she has reduced her workload by keeping most courses consistent. She was surprised that this more minimal approach to class setup did not negatively affect student

outcomes and realized she had been doing more work than necessary.

Collaboration with colleagues has also become an important part of our process. We have found that collaboration with like-minded mother artists in academia can provide a place to tune and harmonize our research skills to discover new ways of managing the "tension between the need for time, art-making, and the time-intensive need of children" (Jackson 167). Furthermore, we share resources, lesson plans, and grading strategies with all of our colleagues to lighten our collective load. Collaboration makes our work better and less time intensive.

Streamlining grading further reduces workload and, as a bonus, is often appreciated by students. We critically assess courses to eliminate nonessential assignments and simplify grading. We consider which assignments require personalized feedback, which can be scored by teaching assistants or self-assessed, and which could be graded based on participation or completion. These changes make our teaching loads throughout the semester more manageable. These proactive approaches mirror how an artist might approach their studio practice—periodically assessing their creative goals and making intentional choices about what to prioritize and what to scale back or set aside for another time.

However, we have less control over some academic work, such as committee assignments and administrative duties, because chairs and deans assign it. Clear communication with leadership can help us balance these responsibilities. We have learned to ask if requests for participation are mandatory or optional and to request a reevaluation of current duties when new ones are assigned, such as asking, "Can I remove something from my current load to accommodate this new task?" These conversations can be risky, especially before tenure, as service is an evaluation area for promotion.

Audrey recalls being told by her chair to expect more than seventy hours of work a week when she was first hired. Because of these expectations, asking to lighten the load in any way can make one feel like a "slacker" and put one at risk of being seen as less competent or dedicated. Diplomacy is essential, as our chairs, deans, and colleagues—whose votes can influence tenure decisions—can make this aspect of our work more or less malleable. Intentionally developing relationships with leadership over time can help make these conversations less risky and help academics to understand what conversations will not be productive.

Tara's department shows another creative approach to building sustainable careers: Her teaching area colleagues recently came together with support from their chair to collectively and critically examine the ongoing administrative and committee work. They eliminated unnecessary service and quantified the time for each task to divide the workload. This effort helped make visible all the work taking place in the background and supported

everyone in understanding the ins and outs of the area. By fostering transparency, this process addressed quiet expansions of responsibilities over time, ensuring that each individual's workload was manageable and aligned with their broader goals.

Partnership at Home

Although this article focuses mostly on professional challenges and adaptations, personal relationships, particularly with life partners, play a crucial role in determining academic success (Jacobs and Gerson; Philipsen). Andrea O'Reilly emphasizes that this often-overlooked dynamic is essential to combining an academic career with motherhood (442). O'Reilly and Lynn O'Brien Hallstein assert that gender equity "in the home is more often a determinant of employment success than family-friendly policies in the workplace" (12). Like artmaking, relationship-building requires ongoing negotiation, adaptation, and creative problem-solving.

It is important to note that not all mothers in academia have partners. For example, Tara was a single mother through graduate school and the first six years of being a professor. O'Reilly's research shows that single mothers tend to fare better in academia than partnered parents in normative relationships. She points out that because single mothers have sole financial responsibility for their families, "opting out is simply less of an option" (O'Reilly 449). This was certainly true for Tara, who, despite the hardships, felt a deep sense of commitment to her job and the stability it provided for her and her child.

For partnered parents, relationships and home structures are crucial. In *The Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung discuss how working women often face a "second shift" at home, managing household tasks and childrearing. This imbalance is perpetuated by cultural conditioning, which holds that women are primarily responsible for domestic duties. Karen Christopher and Avery Kolers, coparents and academics, note that when "we consciously aim to resist gendered practices in child rearing, decades of traditional socialization work against most of us" (306). Although Hochschild penned *The Second Shift* in 1989, women today still experience pressure to take on most of the household responsibilities and are often judged for spending time differently (Rodsky 77). This challenge is not simply logistical but emotional and psychological as women push up against societal expectations.

Sandra, for instance, has faced criticism for returning to graduate school and continuing to work while raising children. She has been asked, "How are you going to do all that and be a mom and partner?" and "Don't you feel bad you are leaving your children so much while you're in classes?" Even her mother commented, "I'm worried that you are neglecting your two youngest children with all your activities and interests." These societal expectations and

family dynamics can hinder academic mothers' ability to advance in academia. Sandra writes about her own experience:

> When I started graduate school, my husband took over grocery shopping, meal planning, and cooking because meal preparation was one of the household chores that stressed me out the most. I felt as though I had to hide that information from friends and family because I expected criticism. When some people found out, the response was usually like I won a prize in a husband. The fact that I still carried a huge portion of the household chores was ignored.

The "second shift" is a recipe for burnout. Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel point out that not only does it impact the time women have for work, but it also "creates a divided set of loyalties that men often do not encounter to the same extent" (6). Even in two-parent families, women typically report more time spent on these tasks, while men enjoy more leisure time (Marsh 151). Concerning her relationship, Audrey reflects that when her husband takes on more household tasks and childcare responsibilities, it makes things run more smoothly. However, she still sometimes feels she is doing two full-time jobs—mom and professor—at once: "I run myself ragged and feel like a big failure at both."

We have learned from our experiences that partnerships rooted in equality, mutual respect, and an understanding of one another's professional pursuits—whether in academia, the arts, or elsewhere—are crucial to sustaining long-term success. Tara has experienced partnership in both traditional and egalitarian structures. Her first marriage adhered to conventional gender roles, while her current one mirrors historian Jodi Vandenburg-Daves's description of successful women who make it to full professor: "[they] seem to share a common characteristic: husbands who stay at home for part of the child-rearing years, work part-time, or at the very least are not in jobs that require a great deal of travel" (qtd. In O'Reilly and Hallstein 38). Though not yet a full professor, Tara credits her success to the unconventional structure she shares with her husband, who works part-time, with both of them alternating days to trade off responsibilities at home.

Even with supportive partners, ongoing conversations are essential to maintaining equality in the relationship. When couples do not intentionally and regularly discuss how to divide household responsibilities, the default often falls into the traditional pattern: One partner focusses on full-time paid work, while the other—usually the mother—takes on all the unpaid labour, sometimes in addition to paid work (Carpenter Estrada et al. 333). Partners, if both are willing, can avoid this pitfall by collaborating to create the kinds of structures supporting both equally in achieving their goals.

Relationships are inherently malleable; people grow and change over time, so relationships must grow and change. Arts writer Hettie Judah poignantly calls for cultural change around shared parenthood, asking, "Wouldn't it be glorious if … artists [and we might add academics] didn't feel pressured to choose between motherhood and a successful career? … If family was not considered a trap for women, because childcare was equally shared between partners?" (12). This vision of shared responsibility and mutual adaptation highlights the potential for relationships to evolve into partnerships that nurture personal and professional growth.

Rocks in the Clay: Things That Are Out of Our Control in Academia

While many aspects of academic work—much like the creative process—are malleable and open to individual adaptations, some elements remain stubbornly fixed, beyond our control. These aspects are like rocks in clay: rigid, unyielding, and often hindering our ability to build what we envision. Just as an artist must navigate the limitations of their materials, we must contend with constraints, such as the tenure clock and fertility, campus climate and culture, and the availability of daycare. These constraints shape what we can create in our academic careers and personal lives.

Understanding situational constraints can help academic mothers acknowledge the limits of their control, allowing them to manage expectations better, prioritize what is most important, and focus their energy on areas where they can create a meaningful impact rather than expend it on unchangeable factors. By recognizing fixed elements, academic mothers can develop more realistic strategies for balancing their multifaceted roles.

Tenure Clock and Timing of Children

The timeline to earn advanced degrees and secure tenure often coincides with a woman's peak fertility years. Researchers Ward and Wolf-Wendel state: "For many academic women, the tenure and biological clocks tick simultaneously" and can even work against each other, as stress can interfere with a woman's ability to get pregnant (7). The tenure process typically lasts six to seven years, with faculty reviewed at the end and either achieving tenure or being let go. The math is not on women's side, as fertility dips in the mid-thirties and early forties. Tara was surprised to learn that her pregnancy at the age of thirty-seven classified her as a "geriatric pregnancy" with higher risks. Therefore, if women want to bear children and pursue academic careers, timing becomes an important concern.

Women are often told that mothers can only succeed in academia if they "sequence [their] reproduction to coincide with ambition" (Martin 11) and are advised to delay childbirth. Consequently, the majority of women "who

achieve tenure indicate that they had fewer children than they would have liked" (O'Gorman 180). Another option is to wait until after birthing and raising children to attain advanced degrees and start work in academia. Like many women, Sandra waited until her children were all in school before attending graduate school. However, this choice has led to pushback, with people asking her if it is "worth it" to pursue her master's at her age—an ageist perspective that discounts her life experiences and their value to her academic work.

Moreover, women in academia are frequently encouraged to time their births around the academic calendar, with August, December, or summer births being ideal. Audrey had her child in December, as she says, "timed perfectly," allowing her to take leave during the spring semester and take advantage of her summer off. But this was a lucky coincidence: Fertility does not always align with plans. Collectively, Tara, Audrey, and Sandra have experienced four miscarriages and difficulties in conceiving. For academic women who wish to become mothers, precise timing is not always an option. These constraints highlight the challenges of balancing professional and personal goals and how deeply academia intersects with–and often dictates–family planning, making these pressures feel invasive.

Like other creative processes, conception can feel particularly chaotic and at odds with rigid timelines. Many artists have approached the chaos and uncertainty of parenthood by embracing it in their art. Artist Caitlin Connolly's project *COLLABWITHCHAOS* offers an insightful example of working with unpredictability, as she used her young twin toddlers' scribbles as starting points for her drawings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In her website's artist statement, Connolly reflects that artists can "revel in [their] ability to dance with what is not yet known, seen, organized, or understood." Similarly, artist, mother, and academic Meaghan Brady Nelson paints collaboratively with her child, working on large canvases together and passing smaller works back and forth. She finds that the unpredictability and freedom in her child's painting process "helped me rediscover my own interest in making art" (Nelson and Combe 223). Deciding to have a child while working in academia can feel like a collaboration with chaos. Just as Connolly and Nelson trust their work is enriched by the intervention of their children, academic mothers can trust that their lives and careers will be shaped in meaningful ways by their children, regardless of when they decide to have them and how forthcoming they are in arriving.

Availability of Affordable Daycare

When children arrive, access to affordable daycare becomes a critical concern for mothers in academia. Sandra knows this intimately because when her children were younger, she ran her preschool, which provided extended options for working parents. When Tara was in graduate school, her institution provided on-campus daycare, which allowed her to balance classes and childcare. This support was vital, especially as a single parent without any family nearby.

However, daycare remains a significant expense and logistical burden for academic mothers with young children. Tara's current institution lacks on-site daycare, and Audrey's institution closed its daycare during the COVID-19 pandemic. When Audrey asked her university's chief wellbeing officer about the daycare reopening, he said he would check into it, and then when contacted again, he was unresponsive to her emails. Her chair suggested pursuing the issue through the university's faculty senate, but Audrey did not feel she had the time to pursue uncertain systemic support that would probably not take effect before her son went to preschool (Martin 19). However, Audrey would like to pursue this once she is tenured and can afford to invest the time and attention to support other academic mothers.

Despite the clear need for such services, universities have generally been reluctant to allocate significant resources to daycare, even though it is essential for the successful participation of academic mothers in their professional roles. As Kristin Marsh observes, "They understand you need pens and paper to do your job. They don't care that you need childcare to do your job" (145). In Marsh's study of nineteen women in academia, none reported having access to on-site daycare or support for off-site daycare (145). Consequently, many academic mothers are compelled to seek and research alternative childcare arrangements, adding another layer of complexity to the already challenging task of balancing professional and personal responsibilities. Some mothers imaginatively find and rely on informal networks, such as childcare exchanges with other parents, whereas others attempt to negotiate flexible work hours or adjust their schedules to accommodate childcare needs. These strategies, though necessary, require constant adaptation and creative problem-solving.

Campus Climate and Culture

Family-friendly policies and an environment that encourages utilizing them might be the difference necessary for a mother to achieve tenure. However, even when family-friendly policies exist, they are often difficult to access. Policies may be unknown or underutilized, requiring mothers to seek out resources (Vancour 167). Additionally, some women hesitate to use these policies, fearing they will be seen as "weak" or that their colleagues will need to "take up the slack," for example, during their maternity leave (Marsh 141).

Ward and Wolf-Wendel argue that higher education must implement policies and foster environments where these policies can be utilized without fear of negative repercussions (12). When mothers choose to take maternity leave, it empowers the mother and colleagues who may feel hesitant to use such resources.

Academic mothers can also request creative adjustments to existing policies. For example, rather than taking the one-semester maternity leave offered by her institution, Tara talked with her chair and negotiated a lighter course load spread over an entire year. This arrangement benefited her department by allowing her to cover essential courses that would have been difficult to staff and helped her family by enabling a smoother transition to life with a new child.

Marsh notes that the experience of "academic mothers is often really shaped by an individual administrator or chair, or by supportive colleagues" (146). As discussed earlier, department chairs and other leadership can significantly affect the work-life balance of mothers in academia, with attitudes ranging from bias against to support for caregiving (Eversole et al. 74). Researcher and academic Kim Powell emphasizes that "unless female faculty members who are mothers have strong advocates in positions of power who value working parents, they are particularly in danger of not reaching the rank of tenured professor because their very presence challenges the status quo" (50).

Given these constraints, it becomes crucial for academic mothers to be intentional in cultivating relationships with leaders within their departments, whether through mentorship or direct communication. In addition, side-by-side mentorship with peers can also be invaluable. Identifying other academic mothers and seeking opportunities for collaboration or guidance can provide essential support.

Conclusion

This article analyzes the parts of our academic careers that are malleable and those that are fixed, highlighting both the challenges and possibilities we encounter as academic mothers. We recognize the significant challenges we face (Martin 13) and the stress that academic mothers endure (Eversole et al. 72). However, we aim to move beyond a narrative of struggle to give space for joy and create action towards a more just and forward-thinking future. The tensions between professional demands and caregiving responsibilities are real, but we choose to focus on the aspects of our jobs that we can control, approaching these challenges with an artistic mindset to design more fulfilling and manageable careers. Rather than striving to meet idealized standards, we can focus on what can be accomplished despite these inevitable constraints. Rebecca Woodhouse asserts,

> When we listen to our own needs and desires and to those of our families, we manage our time and space as necessary. The equilibrium is personal and unique, but the common factor is that nobody has perfectly balanced days to live happily ever after. Balanced days come and go, but we find the equilibrium in the weeks, months and years we need to work and to care for our children. We can assess our goals, make our art, get gallery shows, and (gasp!) love our children enough to remember to feed them. Word has it, our children even benefit from watching us prioritize our needs and theirs. (309)

As artists, we know balance is not always accomplished through symmetry or rigid structures, placing things evenly or applying idealized standards. Disparate parts working together also produce symmetry. In art and life, balance is not a static state but an ongoing process of negotiation, adjustment, and acceptance of complexity.

Our efforts to create balance do not absolve institutions of their responsibility to support working parents. As Virginia L. Lewis asserts, "Acceptance [of mothers in academia] is wonderful, yet it is really a bare minimum" (62). Institutions can recognize that supporting family life is not a personal or private issue but a public and social one, essential to fostering a thriving academic environment. A broader cultural shift is needed—one that views caregiving and family as complementary to academic careers rather than obstacles.

Recommendations for Institutional Change

Systemic changes can address the structural barriers that currently hinder mothers in academia. Implementing policies and practices supporting caregivers and promoting work-life integration can foster an environment where academic mothers (and all academics who desire better work-life balance) can thrive. There are several ways universities can lead a shift towards a more equitable workplace by creatively reimagining structures to support academic parents. These include more adaptable work schedules, support for workload management, greater options for tenure clocks, support for childcare, and improvements to campus culture.

More adaptable schedules benefit everyone. Since the pandemic, Tara and Audrey have observed a significant increase in students preferring online meetings over in-person ones. Virtual meetings save students commuting time, resolve parking challenges, and allow seamless transitions between academic work and other responsibilities. For students who are also mothers, online meetings reduce or eliminate the need for daycare arrangements. To address the needs of these students and faculty, institutions could expand opportunities for remote work. They could offer options, where feasible, to teach classes online or in hybrid formats. Much committee work can also be

conducted virtually rather than in person. Where working online is not an option—as in hands-on studio art classes or other lab courses—departments can schedule with faculty needs in mind. Every year, Tara's department sends out a survey that asks faculty their preferences for teaching times and whether they want to condense all classes to two days or spread them across the week. This practice helps the department to adapt work schedules to faculty needs. It also acknowledges that these needs change over time.

To assist with workload management, universities, colleges, and departments can critically assess faculty expectations. Leadership can explore options for reducing or redistributing service work to ensure more equitable distribution. When possible, staff and student employees can be engaged to support administrative and advisory tasks. Professional development opportunities can focus on streamlining grading procedures and other time-saving strategies. In tenure deliberations, placing a higher value on teaching and service—at least equal to that of research and scholarship—would prevent women, who are often assigned more of these responsibilities and tend to place greater emphasis on their work in these areas (Hallstein and Hayden 175; Houpalainen and Satama; Martínez and Ortíz; Nelson and Combe 219), from being disadvantaged. Tenure policies that support and value collaborative research also help alleviate the pressure on individual researchers by distributing responsibilities across a team, leading to more manageable workloads. These policies would recognize the collective nature of many academic endeavours, fostering a more sustainable approach to career development.

Universities can give academic mothers options to pause the tenure clock, although the postponement of the accompanying salary raise and professional security is not ideal. More flexible tenure policies can help alleviate the pressure to time childbearing around academic career milestones, allowing women to make decisions about family and career that align with their unique circumstances. Institutions can also grant faculty the option to shift to part-time work during times of greater personal needs (whether caring for children, parents, or partners) without losing their place on the tenure track.

Access to affordable and reliable childcare, particularly on campus, significantly reduces logistical challenges and supports all academic parents—mothers and fathers alike—as well as students with children in balancing their professional and caregiving responsibilities. If on-campus childcare is not possible, universities can support faculty in connecting with nearby childcare facilities. Institutions can also facilitate the creation of informal childcare exchange networks among faculty and staff to help meet this critical need.

Universities can actively foster a campus culture that supports academic mothers. This includes providing adequate nursing spaces and safe areas where children can play while parents study or work. Whenever appropriate, children

can be welcomed into classes and meetings. Family-friendly policies are another essential aspect of campus culture. Generous, accessible, and adaptable maternity and paternity leave policies should be well-publicized, empowering academic mothers to utilize them without fear of career repercussions.

Finally, universities can promote work-life balance by offering leadership training for department chairs and administrators on the unique challenges faced by academic mothers and other caregivers. Encouraging transparency, open dialogue, and peer mentoring—especially among parents—can help build a supportive community where caregiving is valued as an integral part of academic life. Institutions can also create mentorship programs specifically designed to help academic parents balance personal and professional responsibilities while fostering the confidence to set boundaries when needed.

All these changes would not only benefit academic mothers, but would foster a more inclusive, equitable academic environment where all faculty members—regardless of caregiving responsibilities—can flourish. By leading these systemic changes, universities can redefine what it means to support academic careers, viewing faculty as holistic individuals with rich personal lives outside their professional roles.

So What Are We Trying to Build?

In academia, men often describe the pursuit of tenure as a "game" to be won, while women view it as a "balancing act," involving personal sacrifices for career success (Gunter and Stambach). For us, academia is not a game but a challenge to build fulfilling lives that integrate career and family. Reflecting on these metaphors, we question whether the "tallest tower" mentality is truly in anyone's best interest.

What if universities focussed less on competition and more on the holistic development of faculty and students? What if academic mothers were valued as assets rather than penalized for having children? What if fulfilling careers and meaningful relationships stood along high-quality scholarship as important goals of academia? Shifting towards this mindset would transform institutions, ensuring greater representation of women in graduate programs and tenured positions. This shift would benefit everyone in academia, leading to a more inclusive and equitable community.

Ultimately, we return to the question posed at the beginning: What are we trying to build? Our work is not about creating a tall, spindly tower but about constructing stable, sustainable lives that integrate professional success with personal fulfillment. By applying the creative problem-solving skills honed through our artistic practices, we aim to build careers that succeed in academia and thrive in the beautiful complexity of motherhood.

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