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Labor Pains in the Academy¹

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This piece offers autoethnographic reflections on crossroads to which many academics come: whether to seek (or postpone or avoid) parenthood and when. The author deeply explores the personal (her own trajectories from daughter and sister to potential mother and from graduate student to full professor) in order to reflect on structural constraints associated with graduate education, the academic job market, and institutional policies and politics.

Key words: mothering, parenting, academia, higher education, autoethnography

Inside each of us, British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips noted, are many lives competing to be lived.

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As a little girl, I face off innumerable times with my patient, child-centered mother. Her version of “losing it” consists of a sigh, a narrowed gaze, and the caution, “Just wait until *you* have children.”

By age ten, I begin to sass this hands-on-hips retort: “Mother, I am *never* having children.”

I turn 40 in January 2011. I have never been pregnant. I have never tried to become pregnant. Indeed, I have spent more than two decades systematically preventing pregnancy. And...

I think about “that other life” every day.

In 1993, I meet the man I would marry two years later. He and I regularly intellectualize about having children: What would the experience contribute to our lives and relationship? How would we reallocate time, space, and energy? My head can organize a life that includes children, but my body experiences only fleeting maternal twinges, no sustained pull. In “The Conversation,” Jamie Warner warns of her biological clock’s “deafening noise” signifying “impending doom.” My clock? Barely a sonic blip, let alone doom-inducing boom.

From ages 22 to 27, I immerse myself in the University of South Florida’s PhD program in communication. While teaching two classes a semester and taking three, I observe the packed schedules of my mentors, who heroically balance relational responsibilities with research, undergraduate and graduate teaching, masters and PhD advising, and endless committee work. Perhaps half the department faculty has

children, and there seems to be no necessary relationship between teaching effectiveness, research productivity, and parental status.

During this period, nonacademic family members, friends, and even strangers query, “When will you start a family?”

I always want to say, “I *have* a family” but opt instead for the strategically ambiguous, “It’s an ongoing discussion.”

At 27, I complete my PhD. Thirty applications and four campus interviews later, I land a tenure-track job at a liberal arts college. My search and success no doubt are aided by the facts that, unlike many of my peers, I am not tethered to a home, and I have a financially secure partner willing and able to relocate. The college may not be the scholarly Shangri-la for which my mentors groomed me, but its academic reputation is solid and rising (not to mention its location in Winter Park, Florida—paradisiacal compared with the tundra on which my husband and I gutted out 22 upper-Midwest winters).

As a young professor, I take comfort in my relatively long-range opportunities to combine scholarly production and reproduction. After all, as work-family experts Robert Drago and Joan Williams report in “A Half-Time Tenure-Track Proposal,” the average academic woman earns her PhD at 34 and goes up for tenure at 40. My ground feels fertile. Articles in press! Supportive husband! Book contract! Finish book, make baby, make tenure. Or make tenure, then baby. Options! Years to decide! At the time, I am unfamiliar with data like those offered by higher education reporter Jon Marcus in “Helping Academics Have Families and Tenure Too”: only

“one in three women who starts down the tenure track without...a baby will ever have one.”

Shower invitations from friends, kin, and the occasional kindred academic begin appearing in my mailbox with increased frequency. “Join us as we celebrate the blessed coming of our [first, second, third, fourth] child, [insert name].” I dutifully purchase practical gifts, gobble squares of sheet cake adorned with pink or blue buttercream roses, and take on the mom-e-tition in contests such as “Drop the Clothespin.”

For other associates, parenthood proves perilous and expensive. Monitored ovulation, scheduled and regimented copulation, artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization. Strained marriages, drained bank accounts.

That kind of embodied pull remains as foreign to me as Honduran adoption. Brace yourself for millennial blasphemy, but to be honest, I don’t feel overly drawn to *live* children, let alone potential ones. I confess to cringing at their public displays of pouting, squealing, and wailing.

“It’s different when they’re your own,” I keep hearing.

But for a social scientist, that seems a risky hypothesis to test. And what if it *is* different—and *worse*?

At the same time, I recognize that if my husband and I ever were pricked by parenting pangs, my teaching-focused position might prove more conducive to work-family balance than a “publish-or-perish” position at a research-intensive institution. You might have noticed the *might* preceding *prove more conducive*. My

new academic department consists of four fathers ranging in age from the late 40s to the 60s. Though my colleagues can offer insights about parenting and academia, I have no departmental role model for how to align the mommy and the tenure tracks.

My trek to tenure takes twists familiar to many academic women. As service responsibilities alone balloon to 20 and 25 hours a week, a review letter brands my professional pursuits as too narrowly focused on—can you guess?—gender.

Of 14 faculty members and administrators who evaluate me for tenure, only two are women. The four fathers, a six-member Faculty Evaluation Committee, the dean, and the president: all white heterosexual men. Though on every measure, I exceed the criteria for tenure and promotion, I never consider my position secure. If the embodied pull of “that other life” had come during those years, I likely would have dismissed it as professional anxiety.

The first thread breaks loose silently, imperceptibly, but the unraveling of my marriage accelerates in 2003. I am 32 and assembling materials for tenure.

It would be years before I encountered articles such as “Full-time Women Faculty off the Tenure Track,” “Caught between Two Worlds: Mothers as Academics,” and “Marriage and Baby Blues: Redefining Gender Equity in the Academy.” What if I had known from the beginning that, compared with male colleagues, I was significantly more likely to experience marital instability, to have fewer children than I wanted, to remain child-free, and to divorce? Would I have made different life and work choices?

My husband begins to say, “I feel so unhappy. I don’t know what I want. I don’t know who I am.” I faithfully chair the search for sources of his angst and uncertainty. Week after week, session after session, every Tuesday for nine months. Only in writing this piece do I recognize that as a gestational period.

On April 11, 2006—with no forethought, he later tells me—my husband looks at our counselor, then at me, and says, “I’m leaving.” The reflexive researcher, I spend the remainder of our session pulling knots and ripping seams. “Where will you go?” “For how long?” “*Why?*” Twisted piles of thread on the floor.

I somehow drive us home from that session. He enters the back door, packs our largest suitcase, and moves out.

When I lay down for my first solitary sleep, I notice the blink on my answering machine. My younger brother had called to tell me that he and his wife are expecting their first child.

Four weeks later, in the World Series of Marriage, my husband and I attempt reconciliation, going “all in.” But almost immediately upon his return home, I feel an embodied push. Unrelenting grinding in my gut, propulsion from within my chest. Like rejecting an organ. This time, I pack our largest suitcase and half the artifacts of our shared life.

Well-meaning people proffer their well-meaning mantra: “At least you have no children!”

I do experience some relief, a sense of liberation from those brutal Tuesdays. But I don’t feel “thankful” to be without children, to be alone, to be losing the entire family I co-created.

My nephew Ethan enters my life in December 2006. I am there, in Gainesville, when all return from the hospital. Their lives, their home, seem so full. My brother and his wife ask me—the aunt without a partner, without a child, without a God—to be Ethan’s godmother.

For the holidays, they host our entire family: my parents, my older brother, his wife, and their three daughters. The house bursts with three moms, three dads, four kids . . . and me. My first uncoupled Christmas since 1990.

My husband and I try to throw our home overboard before the *SS Florida* market sinks to the bottom. One price drop, one gut drop, after another. A beacon appears! For him. He meets the woman who will become his second wife. As he begins co-parenting her two small children, it occurs to me that our divorce and my recovery coincide with my fertility’s final years. This does not constitute a tort for which one can be compensated. There may be fault lines, but there is no fault in this “no-fault” state. Tenure clocks can be stopped; the biological clock runs unabated.

Sabbatical and marriage end the same semester. When positions open at the University of South Florida and Arizona State University, I take stock. I can go anywhere—but not without risk. Taking another job means giving up tenure in an increasingly unstable market. Positions—even entire departments—can be eliminated, and I have no partner to fall back on financially.

I also assume that eventually I will date and enter another relationship. Perhaps the absent embodied pull had as much to do with marital alienation as it did with

my own wishes or the demands of my job. Would I experience that pull in a future relationship? I believe I could navigate the cross-currents, launching Research I scholarship while setting sail for parenthood, but would that prove the most meaningful, fulfilling voyage? I remember reading Adam Phillips's *On Flirtation* in graduate school and being struck by his notion that inside each of us are many lives "competing to be lived."

Meanwhile, my department grants permission to relocate my tenure to a newly born program in Critical Media and Cultural Studies. I decide to stay at the liberal arts college, choosing this competing life.

During construction of my new academic home, I fill out the 90-minute personality profile for the online dating service eHarmony, sitting longest with the question, "Do you want children?" I think about my patient, child-centered mother, the unraveling of my 13-year relationship, and the phantom embodied pull. With trepidation, I check "maybe."

One year, hundreds of electronic prospects, 16 flesh-and-blood men, and innumerable casual cups of coffee later, I meet my fiancé John. When I open his profile for the first time, I find a fellow divorced, Midwest transplant, recovering Catholic, USF alum. Overlap upon overlap—until I see the children box marked "yes."

March 28, 2009, John and I plan an overdue visit to Gainesville. My brother calls at 8:30 a.m. to apologize. "Ethan still isn't feeling well," he explains. "We're headed to the pediatrician."

John and I embark on a triathlon of lawn mowing, weed pulling, and hedge trimming. We share lunch on the deck and a relaxing bath. Neither of us hears our phones ringing downstairs.

As I'm drying off, John appears with my cell. "It's your mother. Sit down."

My mom is not asthmatic, but as each word leaves her body, it sounds like she's struggling to suck it back in: "Ethan . . . not breathing . . . died."

John and I find my brother and his wife outside the emergency room. She clutches her belly, swollen from eight months of her second pregnancy. Though divorce does not prepare one to face the grief of a death so unexpected, so out of order, I recognize the abyss behind their gazes and the raw terror of facing a home without their beloved.

On his knees, my brother weeps before the body of his son, just two years old. His wife strokes Ethan's surfer blond locks. I caress his forehead, his round cheeks, his cooling hands—the shell of their child, my godchild. My brother and his wife had awakened the devoted, exhausted parents of a boy they thought had the flu. They did not—could not—know that Ethan's intestine had flipped onto itself. Electrolyte imbalance induced cardiac arrest. Though they immediately began CPR (my sister-in-law is a paramedic), Ethan already had gone. Suddenly, violently, their home became as my home: childless.

When my parents arrive in the Gainesville terminal, they have aged a decade or more. "This is the worst day of our lives," they say again and again.

My older brother and I assist with the arrangements: flowers in primary, “cheerful” colors; stone white casket, a hauntingly small 42 inches; burial plot overlooking a playground. To risk this . . . I never before considered parenthood an act of courage.

Twenty days later, my younger brother calls to say that they are in labor. A child comes, healthy, a boy, Grant. John and I again make our way to Gainesville. Different hospital. Different ward. New unbounded joy. Still-infinite grief. We help them bring Grant home to his brother’s house, toys, clothes. While nursing, my sister-in-law confides that my brother said he hopes John and I will give Grant a cousin.

Mother’s Day, 2009, my academic program graduates our inaugural class of 16. As our “kids” cross the stage, I stand to hug each one. I have advised six of them and mentored all in either two or three courses.

Later that week, John and I chaperone one graduate and three returning students at the Cannes Film Festival. The group made a video about sweatshop labor for my class, and it’s being screened at the Short Film Corner. As I walk the red carpet with these star-struck aspiring filmmakers, something stirs in me. I’m not sure what it feels like to be a proud parent, but I imagine it’s something like this.

John turns 44 in 2011. We’ve joked that his sperm need Scuba Dawg sea scooters to motor upstream while my eggs near their expiration date. I do not know whether our aging pre-persons will take up residence together. I do know that I feel

fortunate to make this decision outside the pressures of finishing my degree, of securing a tenure-track job in a location also acceptable to my partner, and of earning tenure. Indeed, I will have been promoted to full professor by the time you read this piece. John and I will not have to play reproduction roulette, calculating a September to December conception to coincide with a birth outside the academic calendar.

At the same time, I am mindful that at 44 and 40, respectively, John and I may have waited too long for the competing life that includes children. I also wonder: if we choose that competing life—and it chooses us—will I join the nearly 60 percent of faculty mothers who give serious consideration to leaving academia (see Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden’s 2002 *Academe* article, “Do Babies Matter?”)?

I share the convictions expressed by philosopher Jean Kazez in “The Long and Winding Road” that “academics ought to value excellence (and take care in defining it), but also take responsibility for creating structures within which people can live good lives.” If we can’t get work-life right in academia—potentially one of the most progressive, holistic, flexible, and autonomous environments—what hope is there to transform systems in solidarity with our billions of sisters and brothers who labor outside the academy?

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