

Beyond the Belly

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As I write this I am seven months pregnant. I just spent the weekend at a Canadian literature conference being the “pregnant one.” Group conversations I was part of repeatedly went like this: “How’s your research Joe Blow? How’s your work Jane Doe? How many months pregnant are you Laura Moss? Really, wow. I don’t know how you do it. That’s amazing. OK. Good luck. So, what did you think of that paper Rohinton McKinton?” I felt like stapling my own paper abstract to the lower half of my shirt, since that was where people were looking anyway.

With my answer to the how-far-along question, many turned on their heels and walked away satisfied, leaving me slightly embarrassed and certainly less than satisfied. The question is not offensive in and of itself, but after over a hundred times in four days imminent childbirth seems to be what defines you. I would not have minded the repetition of the question as much if it had been accompanied by conversations about literature and the conference themes as well as about motherhood.

During my frequent trips to the washroom, I got questions about the gory details of my pregnancy. Apparently that space provides a safe house for queries that are otherwise off-limits for colleagues. Like most pregnant women, I am only too happy to talk about bodily functions with my friends, especially the recently pregnant—but with strangers? I know that the questions come from compassionate and caring people, but the cumulative effect is to make them feel invasive as well.

Asked “How are you doing?” I answered like everyone else: “Fine.” But people pushed on: “No, how are you *really* doing?” I was diplomatic enough

to choke back the truth: “Well, actually, Person-I-Have-Just-Met, my legs are sore; I’m having Braxton-Hicks contractions, trouble breathing, and my head aches. I feel like I have a watermelon strapped to my waist, a bowling ball between my legs, a foot sticking through my ribs, and never-ending pressure on my bladder.” As a polite Canadian and as someone trying to keep up my professional decorum, I just kept saying, “Oh, yeah, I’m pretty tired, too.” I was actually just tired of my pregnant body being the public space of conversation.

In the 1970s, a similarly-qualified colleague at a professional conference asked my mother who was looking after her children. He supplied the answer: “God?” We have moved on: this weekend only one or two people asked if my husband was with (not “looking after”) our two kids. But I did feel as if I was being asked who was looking after my research.

With this pregnancy I have received my share of the inappropriate comments that my sister chalks up to the “socially unthinking.” When I was five and a half months pregnant I gave a plenary address at a conference in Germany. The conference organizer told me that he had been “warned” that I was pregnant and several different people commented to me that “real” academics don’t have children in Germany. In one senior class at UBC, my students were visibly relieved when I told them that I was pregnant because “we were worried that you were just getting fat.” At graduation, a student whom I had taught in two upper-level university classes moved my academic gown aside to rest his hand on my belly while introducing me to his parents and grandmother. One man I work with has said, twice, that I am so big that it is no longer funny. The irony, I realize, is that I would be equally peeved if everyone ignored my pregnancy, and I would rail against the expectations of completely disembodied intellect.

I know that increased maternity leaves, the introduction of paid parental leaves, and family-flexible teaching schedules are all recent institutional supports for having children; they have made it more manageable to balance a family and an academic position than it was even a decade ago. I know that women in generations before mine often had to choose between the two. If they chose both, I know that they faced far greater institutional and social barriers than I ever will. And yet, there still seems to be an inverse correlation between the size of one’s pregnant belly and the credibility the pregnant woman carries in the workplace.

I am not a “hero,” “brave,” “amazing,” or “crazy” (words people used to describe me at the conference). I am just balancing life and a job: like all

faculty. My balance happens to include a partner and children. I am not claiming that the balance is easy, that I am not exhausted a good deal of the time, that I don't panic about how well I am parenting and/or researching, or that I don't think that Ativan is a great medical invention, but I am saying that I am not exceptional. In the past two years, seven babies have been born to faculty members in the Department of English at UBC. Twenty of the 30 Assistant and Associate Professors in my department have children under 18 (11 women, nine men), indeed 12 have children under age seven. In my generation of postcolonialists and Canadianists from Dalhousie to McGill, from McMaster to Simon Fraser, many academics I know balance families and very productive research and teaching profiles.

The reality of today is that even at the conference I attended, many academics were also parents. When parents are in public without their children they are simply academics. The pregnant academic woman troubles the mind-body split expected of the intellectual because she is visibly straddling both. She projects the balance that many people are carrying and she embodies the gender gap already in academia. The questions about the belly are an extension of the "You're not a *real* professor, are you?" or "Is this really *your* office?" or "can you actually sign this, you don't look like a *regular* professor"—questions that young, particularly female, faculty get all the time anyway. Pregnancy exacerbates what one friend of mine calls the "feminine mismatch with my office and my profession." My friend also points out that some of the same students who ask such questions at the beginning of term come back later to seek advice on their lives and futures as professional women. She shifts from being an anomaly to being a role model in their eyes.

I wonder why, in spite of ample evidence to the contrary, it is still seen as exceptional to be pregnant and professional. The answer is that there is a "normal" academic body—and it's not one with a growing belly, spit-up stains on the shoulder, or even a Father's Day construction paper tie around the neck. It is a small, gray-haired man with leather patches on his elbows and crumbs in his unkempt beard (picture Yaweh in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*). The idea of the normal academic body needs to catch up to the progressive critical theories that we teach at university, and indeed to the reality that most of us live.

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