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Reading and Writing Academically as a Mother[1]

I normally do not do this kind of writing. Eschewing the 'confessional' mode in any text that will extend beyond the reading circle of my friends and family, I am reluctant to believe that the relation of my subjective experience will be significant to an audience that goes beyond those who know me personally.

Particularly in my native America, where memoirs top the bestseller lists, the revelation of the personal is considered a mark of authenticity in popular literature as well as in criticism.[2] Critical writing often adopts the confessional mode, with authors using the personal voice to demonstrate greater investment in their subject matter.[3] In part this has resulted from identity politics or what has been more negatively called the 'Balkanization' of American society. More situated readings result from the decline of 'grand narratives' and the realization that all critical discourse is limited by individual perception. Awareness has grown that literary fiction and criticism are shaped by hegemonic cultural practices. Situated readings and personal criticism may then be more honest as well as cutting-edge. As an African American one knows more about the issues of color prejudice and racial profiling first hand and the multiple forms of gender and race prejudice with which black women contend. As a lesbian academic, one may be able to write in a more informed fashion about the issues of sexuality and gender in Jeanette Winterson's literature and the stylistics thereof.

While I appreciate these arguments, I feel uncomfortable with the assumption underlying them that personal comment invests critical writing with greater value. I generally avoid it. Yet the subject at hand is parenting in academe: specifically, how being a mother affects how I read certain texts and why combining primary parenting and academic work is so difficult, yet needs to be encouraged; the subject *is* personal. Thus you will find a surfeit of I's in the following. Nonetheless, I am wary of assuming a continuity of perception between myself and you, the reader.

I want to say something about what it is to read and write as a mother. I wish to address two types of activity: reading as a retributive or protective parent and the challenges of writing (academically) as a mother, and, more elusively, finding one's

place in academe. In the first case, I write "parent" rather than mother, for I am reluctant to make my comments on reading too gender-specific or essentialist.[4] Both fathers who *do* act as primary parents as well as men who live out more traditional bread-winning roles have spoken to me of experiencing some of the breakdown of critical distance that I reflect on here. I write "mother" in the second case with reference to the socioeconomic reality of women being caretakers in most families and their suffering for this in academe; being the primary parent has large, detrimental effects on an academic's ability to gain a tenured position and win academic status. Yet it also brings, as I will argue, some tangible benefits, which the academe needs to cultivate.

I Reading as a Parent/Mother

For many**,** many years I have been in training to read critically. This process has occurred in many stages. During the course of my secondary education, I began to consult secondary literature in order not necessarily to better understand Melville's *Moby Dick* and Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, typical challenging texts in an American high school curriculum, but to speak and write about literary fiction more in the manner my teachers did. This process was intensified during college, during which time theoretical readings on literature were used to explicate primary texts. Later, in preparation for writing a dissertation on reading fiction and memoirs as a way to better comprehend current American culture, I first tried to summarize in my own words the twentieth-century trends in critical theory that had determined how people read academically. I then tried on a variety of variously-shaped and colored theoretical glasses before deciding on the one pair whose lenses that would determine the way I viewed the subject matter. Before writing an essay about literature now, I first consider the theoretical standpoint to be taken. What will take this piece of writing beyond being an informed close reading and make it, hopefully, new and of interest to a larger audience? What will make it sell? All of this is a move, and an institutionally-condoned one, away from the way I, at least, used to read as a book-addicted child. Then when I read something I liked, whether of baby Babar's horrible loss of his elephant mother to a hunter, or a gender-bending fairy tale in which the heroine takes on the role usually preserved for the youngest son, I took on a version of the narrative voice that gave shape and substance to the storyworld; I began to tell my own experience to myself by using the words or tone of voice of whatever it was I was reading and found compelling.

Yet the more one reads and is taught how to read, the more one makes value judgments. No longer does one wish to or is one *able* to adapt the voice of all of the narrators one encounters. The more tools one has in one's reading armory, the more one becomes aware of what the text is doing and where it is 'weak': critical judgment begins to hold sway. The younger reader's identification with the figures in and behind the text disappears, and one begins to read as a critic, with a view to

identifying what is most important about the work and why. Accordingly, one moves from relating reading experiences in the overtly subjective I voice to generalizing them in the impersonal third person.

However, my critically trained faculties as a reader are regularly overridden in response to one type of subject matter. This is in my reading narratives about the abuse and neglect of children. Here I find my affective response to be so powerful that I overlook formal or aesthetic considerations concerning the text. I read with dual vision, as a trained reader and as a mom.

Let me give some illustrative examples. After the birth of my second child, I initiated a reading group with two close friends. For me, the motivation was my sense of isolation and intellectual torpor during the year of my life in which I was most at home (with a newborn and a three-year-old), most domestic, and least able to take an active part in the public domain. This is a well-documented passage for many women; despite the real and myriad pleasures of mothering young children, one may feel – or I did – that one's personality as an adult has been stolen.

The reading group was there to help me overcome my sense of intellectual isolation, and my two friends, both doctoral students and passionate readers, to talk about the literature they were thinking about in more immediate, emotional ways than those encouraged at the university. As a first task, we composed a list of works we wished to discuss, featuring novels that had most affected us personally. For one of the women, this was Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1983). I will dwell on my reactions to this novel for some time in the following paragraphs, because they demonstrate a tension between the stance of critical distance and skepticism which I have learnt to maintain as a 'trained' reader and the sense of moral condemnation and fury I felt as, what I will call here, a retributive mother reader.

Featuring tensions between Maori and Pakehas in contemporary New Zealand (Pakeha is a term for New Zealanders of European descent), *The Bone People* concerns the figures of a reclusive artist named Kerewin, who identifies with her partially Maori ancestry, a Maori factory worker named Joe, and his adopted, seven-year old, white son Simon, who calls himself Clare. Joe loves his son. Nonetheless, he beats him repeatedly with excruciating, realistically portrayed brutality. Kerewin intervenes in this violence only after she has been unwillingly drawn into the boy's and his father's lives.

Having witnessed Joe 'discipline' his child with slaps and having seen Simon in a beaten state, Kerewin has not wanted to identify Joe as the source of the violence. However, their passionate and strained relationship has remained a mystery to her, as she thinks after the first time she has seen them together: "Why the wariness and drawn-eyed look of the child? Why the bitterness corrupting the man's face? And why, about all, the peculiar frisson of wrongness I keep getting from some of the conversation?"[5] For her, the revelation of the extent of the suspected brutality is sickening:

> From the nape of his neck to his thighs, and all over the calves of his legs, he is cut and wealed. There are places on his shoulder blades where the… whatever you used, you shit… has bitten through to the underlying bone. There are sort of blood blisters that reach round his ribs on to his chest.
>
> And an area nearly the size of my hand, that's as large part of the child's back damn it, that's infected. It's raw and swollen and leaking infected lymph.
>
> That was the first sign I had that something was wrong. Despite his soaked clothes, his T-shirt stuck to his skin.
>
> He didn't make a sound. All his crying was over.
>
> And he wouldn't meet my eyes.
>
> Somehow Joe, e hoa, dear friend, you've managed to make him ashamed of what you've done.
>
> Neat job.[6]

Kerewin, whose interior monologue takes place in Maori and English, interrupts her train of thoughts to address Joe directly as "you shit." She correctly surmises that Simon feels responsible for his being beaten. The reader, in turn, identifies with her shocked horror, her fury at Joe, and her pity for the child who has been hiding the source of his hurt since he has known her. Exhaustion, drunkenness and pain have caused him to let his body give testimony of the regular beating he must endure.

She decides against calling the welfare services and for ending the cycle of abuse by physically interrupting it. Through a fragile truce, it appears that Simon will then remain unscathed; Joe promises to never hit the boy again without Kerewin's explicit approval. Yet when the boy breaks her guitar because – the parent in me screams – he is traumatized by having seen a dead man and being expelled from school, Kerewin angrily tells Joe to beat him.[7] Told from Simon's perspective as he fights to remain upright and retain consciousness, this beating leads nearly to the boy's death, the cracking of his skull, his subsequent hospitalization in a coma, his loss of hearing, and permanent disfigurement.

Kerewin later acknowledges her guilt, saying that she began the assault by striking Simon, when he was pleading to be understood, and then berating him with words before telling his father to do the rest. As she tells Joe:

> You finished it, but I started it… if I had shown more understanding, he wouldn't have tried to start a fight with me. He wouldn't have gone away and vented his anger on the windows. He wouldn't have been picked up by the cops. He would have been home with you… point two, I started the next state too. I flayed him with words, and I've got a vicious tongue…[8]

I quite agree with the fictional Kerewin that she as the guardian against a perpetration of violence becomes its willing agent.

By contrast, what is difficult for me to believe is that the physical and psychological transformations that she and Joe subsequently go through are adequate "atonement" for the crime they have done to the child in their trust:[9] after their bloody separation, Joe attempts to commit suicide by jumping off a cliff in an iso-

lated area, where his broken bones are healed by a Maori wise man; Simon/Clare awakens to the hospital world as a deaf mute, who hates the antiseptic care he receives and attempts to run away; Kerewin, in turn, suffers from stomach cancer in isolation, is visited by an androgynous healer, and survives to rebuild the Maori hall on her family's land.

At the end of the novel the three figures are reunited. Kerewin adopts Simon and marries Joe, so as to lend them the new anonymous identity that her name conveys. The reader is now able to comprehending the image of the protagonists' joyously walking down the street together, offered in the prolepsis at the beginning of the novel:

> They were nothing more than people, by themselves. Even paired, any pairing, they would have been nothing more than people by themselves. But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great.
>
> Together, all together, they are the instruments of change.[10]

The novel ends then in a great party around the rebuilt Maori hall: son Simon and father Joe are reunited in a loving embrace, Kerewin is taken into the bosom of her estranged family; Joe, too, is accepted by his family, despite the damage he has done his adopted son.

I could not accept this ending. I could not forgive Kerewin or Joe for the damage they had done to 'their' child, could not believe in the spiritual and physical renewal that they had undergone to allow them to transcend their roles as abusers. I was furious, furious at the obvious symbolism of the torturer's having his bones broken and healed, of the emotionally wounded woman's going through a pseudo-pregnancy and painful birth before she can nurture an abused child. I was angry at the book for suggesting that these broken adults might be trusted with the guardianship of a boy whom they had very nearly destroyed and have at any rate permanently maimed.

My education leads me to be guarded against so affective a response. Thus I consulted secondary literature about the novel's violence to discover that the founder of the Maori political party has reported that domestic abuse is an unfortunate characteristic of contemporary Maori life, a result of profound disenfranchisement and a wide-spread social problem that results from post-colonial stress. According to Tariana Turia, portrayals of this vicious violence as in *The Bone People* and *Once Were Warriors* demonstrate "[t]he externalisation of the self-hatred [among] the number of Maori who are convicted of crimes of violence and the very high number of Maori women and children who are the victims of violence."[11] Violence to the mute Simon, a Pakeha of noble Scottish ancestry, is then a reflection and an outgrowth of the violence done to the Maori and the difficulty of rendering this violence in words (cf., for instance, Holland). Accordingly, the book's violence may be viewed as a condemnation of current conditions as well as a vision of a healing process that must occur amongst the Maori before rampant domestic violence can

be remedied. Hulme herself has complained that jail terms for child abusers are too short as compared to those who perpetrate property crimes.[12]

Thus seen, the novel's happy end is a reflection of Maori-inspired myth about destruction and renewal.[13] Violence here must be understood as a form of annihilation that must occur before the characters can take on new roles and a form of redemption may occur, like the image of the phoenix out of the flames. Simon/Clare may be seen as a sacrificial figure whose suffering brings about the redemption of those who have wronged him. Understanding the end of the novel to be mythic, one cannot then judge the events related there with realist moral standards. One needs then to accept that the genre changes in the course of the narrative.[14] As a non-Maori, a non-New Zealander, and a non-specialist on post-colonial fiction, I am, moreover, aware that my background may render me ill-equipped to pass judgment over the narrative's events.

But more preeminently, when I read the novel again in order to prepare for writing this essay, I see the boy's horrible visceral suffering. The novel is most successful in its portrayal of Simon/Clare's internal life and his mixture of perpetual emotional and physical pain, showing for instance, how he reflexively protects his face and body when he awakens, because he lives in constant anticipation of blows. After Joe has beaten him once (again), he asks the boy why he has not told Kerewin about their secret, and Simon replies in his wordless manner: "Because she'll know I'm bad, the boy mouths, and starts crying. Because she'll know I'm bad, he says it again and again, gulping miserably through the silent words. She'll know I'm bad."[15] Why should the boy not internalize the violence done to him, when Joe explicitly blames him for the so-called hurts he receives? The knowledge that Simon has been being abused all his life – we are told of the mysterious scars on his body that predated his being rescued by Joe – is likewise horrific. That his natural father, an addict, probably tortured him with needles and scissors – objects of which he is terrified – only adds to our image of Simon's abjection. He has learnt nothing else than that the person who cares for him will also inflict pain.

I believe that the boy would be in better hands were he to be adopted by another family. Simon/Clare is the powerless and literally voiceless individual here. The abuse of his guardians is an abuse of power. For me, Joe's broken arm is not enough, nor are Kerewin's broken guts. These individuals are not responsible enough to parent. I read as a retributive mother. I cannot escape my sense of condemnation of the guardians or anger at them for causing such damage. I scream, *j'accuse*.

My ambivalence concerning *The Bone People* vividly portrays conflicts between different reading roles. What of other reading experiences? I will name just one, more briefly. Recently, I read A. S. Byatt's *Babel Tower* (1996) with an interest in its substantial depictions of trials. Again, two kinds of critical facilities went to work. The practiced reader saw this third novel in a quartet concerning Frederica Potter, her family, and friends as an attempt by the author to offer an epic view of changes in British intellectual and social life. Taking place in the sixties, *Babel Tower* speaks to many of the contrary impulses of the times and manages to place issues con-

cerning contemporary cultural and scientific debate squarely within the lives of its many characters. Preeminently, the novel features Frederica, a Cambridge-educated woman who has made an ill-advised marriage to a man with whom she had hoped to achieve Forsterian connection through sex. Problems arise when it becomes increasingly clear that Nigel can accept her only in quite narrow, traditional terms, as his devoted wife and the mother of their small son Leo: he refuses her requests to work or study, or even to occasionally leave their country home for London. Cutting off contact between her and her mostly male, mostly urban, intellectual friends of whom he is jealous, Nigel increasingly spends time away from home 'on business' and leaves the job of policing Frederica to his two tweedy, spinster sisters and capable housekeeper, who keep her covered with what has been aptly described as a "panoptical gaze."[16] This triad of women provides such a surplus of mothering to Leo that Frederica often feels redundant. Nigel becomes violent and his violence escalates as do Leo's fears for his mother, to culminate in Nigel's throwing an ax at Frederica. Subsequently, she runs away; and, discovering her flight, Leo insists on accompanying her. She goes into hiding in London and sues for divorce on the grounds of cruelty and adultery.

No small part of the ensuing novel then contains a record of the divorce and custody hearings, with Frederica's reflections on them interspersed throughout. These stand in parallel to another trial about the possible banning of a fictional novel within the novel named *Babeltower*. Objectively, I see that the novel describes changing sexual mores in the period it portrays by, for instance, depicting the disconnect between the judge's perception of how wives should behave and the reality of experience for Frederica and women like her. On this note, Frederica reflects after receiving a legal letter in which she is charged with frequent adultery: "It is the Swinging Sixties, but the courts are run by old men in eighteenth-century wigs, with nineteenth-century outward morals, and she will be pulped, mashed, humiliated, *destroyed*."[17] The novel then also comments on social constructions and expectations of motherhood. The court as well as Nigel and his family condemn Frederica's copious reading as a sign of her being an indifferent mother. Moreover, the courtroom is shown to be a place where masculinized justice may be abused to uphold the social status quo and punish non-conformists: Frederica loses the divorce case and very nearly custody of her son. And, as Mara Cambiaghi has pointed out, the trial scenes demonstrate how individual lives can be misrepresented in legal language.[18] The injustice of the law towards women and the less powerful is shown here in the judge's collusion with the husband, who is more like him in terms of class-origin, education, gender, and wealth.

Read with an eye to the debate on education reform that occurs in the novel, *Babel Tower* can also be understood as a meditation on changing ideas about how best to raise children. Nigel represents the voice of elitist male power rituals: he wants his son to go to an all-boy public school and to follow in his footsteps as patriarch in his manorial, rural home. Frederica, by contrast, wishes her son to remain with her in the unconventional, urban, matriarchal arrangement she has

constructed with another highly educated, working single mother, who also sends her child to the local school.

What got me up in arms in my non-distant reading experience was Frederica's blindness to the stupidity of her actions given the adversarial nature of divorce law. She does not go to a doctor about her ax wound, when her face is also still bruised, and thus loses evidence for her divorce suit, as Nigel and his family testify that the event never occurred. The judge even suggests that the, in his eyes, overly-educated and overly-imaginative Frederica has invented this gothic scenario for the court's benefit. Although Nigel has infected her with a venereal disease and she cites this as grounds for suing him for adultery, Frederica, after a period of celibacy and healing, has sex with two men before the divorce trial. The somewhat Machiavellian Nigel has had Frederica's actions recorded by a private detective, and this too greatly weakens her case.

Let there be no mistake about it: I make no judgments about Frederica's sex life. No, what gets me is that as mother to a child who desperately wishes to live with her, she fails to protect him from patriarchal law by not watching her back. (Yes, I am critically aware of my in part culturally-constructed assumptions about how mothers SHOULD be).[19] Look, Frederica, the protective mother as reader in me says, keep your libido and loneliness under wraps until your boy is safely and legally yours, for this is what you must do when the well-being of a powerless individual is in your hands.

The figure of the reader as retributive and protective mother can be viewed in alternative ways. On one hand, it can be argued that the readings I have described are naively emotional, particularly when one recalls that the individuals described are textual constructions rather than actual people. On the other hand, one may say that the need to protect the less powerful becomes immediately pressing through the act of nurturing children and that this experience potentially alters the way we perceive and read. If part of literature's strength lies in its ability to confront readers with ethical dilemmas outside of the realm of their own experience, than reading can be a field for testing moral evaluations. For me, and I wish to restate that this is a personal response, reading *The Bone People* and *Babel Tower* has primarily been a confrontation with the enormous disservice, or – to use a more emotionally-charged word – crime parents and guardians do when they take more interest in their own needs than those of the children with whom they are entrusted. While comprehending critical arguments about the mythic quality of *The Bone People*, I persist in believing that the text is unethical, because it suggests that child abuse can not only heal disturbed adults but perhaps a whole community. In this line, one critical essay about the novel takes the to my mind obscene phrase "beneficial child abuse" as its title.[20]

How do I explain the force of my response to these works, the temporary overwriting of the well-rehearsed role as an objective, critical reader? I suspect that for many humans the love felt for the child one nurtures may be the first experience of caring for someone more than one's self; this love has nothing to do with having

one's own attractiveness be mirrored in the desiring eyes of the beloved.[21] That moment of extreme vulnerability that is entailed in watching an initially defenseless baby make her way into the world is a lesson in the connectedness and fragility of human life. Witnessing the susceptibility of other individuals to pain, one recognizes that the sufferer is also someone's cherished, once defenseless child. A sense of responsibility for others expands beyond the family circle to those one does not know. Illustrating this process is what a befriended father told me about his visceral reaction to seeing images of tortured prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Superimposed upon the images of the Iraqi inmates being terrified by dogs, threatened with execution, or sexually humiliated by US soldiers, he saw the faces of his own two baby girls. His intensity of response to the pain of these men, his visualizing his daughters experiencing similar horrors, is, I believe, a frequent consequence of primary parenting. Thus I believe that my reading experience as a retributive and protective mother has less to do with my being a woman than with the humanizing experience of giving nurturance.

Let me be explicit: I am not making the simplistic argument that parenting is a necessary prerequisite to intense, empathetic responsiveness to the vulnerability of others. No. Rather, I wish to suggest that for many of us, human-all-too-human individuals, taking care of children brings with it a new sense of profound connection to others, particularly those less powerful, and a sense of responsibility concerning their wellbeing. Parenting can then instigate the development of a set of values in which protecting weaker individuals' needs takes on primacy.[22]

II Writing and Researching as a Mother

The arguments I rehearse here will be familiar to readers who conduct research on gender in academia and no surprise to those readers who face the daily hurdles of being primary parents and academics themselves. A significant body of research shows that mothers do not thrive in academia, but quite the opposite. Whether they work in the United States or in Germany, the two countries where I have lived longest and with which I am most familiar, women academics achieve less success than their male counterparts, and mothers do worst of all.

In the US this phenomenon has been well-researched and named. The "baby gap" and the "maternal wall" contribute to the under-representation of mothers in tenured positions. Having a baby derails a woman's academic career unless she has it when she has already won a permanent position, in which case it may well be too late for her to conceive. If she has a child when she is young, during her studies, or shortly after receiving her PhD, it is unlikely that she will gain a tenured position, because getting back onto the tenure track after a few years of doing part-time work may be impossible. Academia functions with an up or out principle: given the competition for permanent jobs, one has to succeed in a rapid vertical trajectory or one will be forced out of the system. Yet by putting off having a child until she has

achieved a permanent position in her late thirties, a woman may well be unwittingly forced to have fewer children than she might have wished to or none at all. Women's fertility does not clock with the chronology of academic achievement. Thus, whereas seventy percent of tenured US male professors are married and have children, this is true for only forty-four percent of women. Moreover, tenured women professors are more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to report that they would have liked to have had more children.[23]

It appears that having a child does not do detrimental damage to a man's academic career, in fact it appears to enhance it, assuming, as is usually the case, that his wife performs primary caretaking. Mothers, by contrast to academic fathers, display what are called resume gaps in their curricula vitae. By taking time off from teaching or a tenure track position, they are regarded as less committed than male colleagues who have worked continuously.

Working in the US is modeled on a traditional man's career: one should start in one's twenties, work 60 hour weeks, and demonstrate dedication by never taking time off. This life disallows the daily work of mothering. Because the majority of women with doctorates 'drop out' to have children they end up being relegated to lower-level, non-tenured positions, as adjuncts and lecturers or part-time faculty. Hence Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden, who have conducted a survey of the careers of 160,000 doctorate recipients from the seventies into the nineties, have argued that gender equity has to be redefined to take in the factor of having children. While successful men in academe appear to enjoy family life and not be penalized for being dads, another reality prevails for women. Hence the 'baby gap.'[24] Mason and Goulden's research highlights a form of inequality that is true for all women in academia, whether mothers or not. Tenured women academics may be childless because they felt that they could not combine the requirements of their work with parenting or they delayed trying to have children until they were no longer biologically able to do so. Consequently, women academics with children are largely missing from the front lines of university life. This represents a loss for all. As one mother and post-doctorate has argued: "Academe deprives itself of that kind of robust understanding that parenting provides to people by limiting the number of mothers in the community."[25]

In Germany, where the expectation of a *Habilitation* or equivalent publishing work prevails, the baby-gap is larger than in the US. Ageism is legal in Germany, with the criterion that a professorship must be taken before a candidate reaches 45 in many *Bundesländer*. Patently, this contributes to the difficulties women have in trying to attain a professorship and have children. Most individuals finish their *Habilitation* in the middle or end of their thirties. The average age to receive a first *Berufung* is 40, in the humanities 42, a prohibitive age for most women to first attempt to conceive. The necessity of taking short-term research positions wherever one is lucky enough to get them as well as the twelve-year limit on temporary university jobs further impede combining academic work and childrearing.[26] For those extraordinary women professors who do have children – and they are to be

admired and cheered on – the path is rocky. Whereas nearly 70% of the men professors' partners provide child care for their children, this is the case for less than 10% of the women professors.[27] The dearth of organized childcare for children between one and three in Germany as well as the traditional structuring of schools to end before lunch only add to the obstacles. Silvia Mergenthal succinctly describes the odds against a woman's combining motherhood and a professorship: she will need to write a *Habilitation* while publishing competitively, remaining geographically flexible, and convincing a male-dominated *Berufungskommission* that their putting her on the *Berufungsliste* will not automatically mean having to give her the first slot there due to her being a woman.[28]

Women academics with children also face a number of perceptual handicaps. If they have taken time off in order to nurture children, they are more likely to be associated with housewives, whose competence at least in American society is considered suspect.[29] The need to appear competent often leads mothers to be silent about the strains they are under as they attempt to fulfill a male model of academic achievement. Women seeking permanent positions report that they feel that they cannot mention the needs of their children for not being able to attend meetings, as men might do and even be applauded for, for fear of appearing unprofessional.[30] If women chose not to take time off when they have babies, they may be penalized for not fulfilling expectations about how mothers 'should' behave. Overwhelmingly, having babies functions as a career obstacle for women academics. And those men who do take time off to act as the primary parent in their families face similar prejudices and obstacles as do women.

What about writing as an academic mother? Anyone who writes professionally – mother or not – may feel that writing simply takes too much time. Either one does it poorly, or one has to be endlessly diligent about dotting one's i(s), getting one's footnotes in good order, being on top of the newest research, and mastering one's texts stylistically. To create room for this work within the structure of a family as the primary parent is enormously challenging. When I had my first child, was working three part-time jobs and trying to complete a master's degree thesis, I described the process of making work time happen as an exercise in aggressive self-preservation. Such aggression is anathema to being the primary parent, where qualities of generosity in terms of time, tolerance, patience, and commitment to doing the dirty work are paramount. A book project, like a baby, requires devotion, thrives poorly if neglected for even a short time, and has a tendency to be voracious about other parts of one's life.

One point of comparison between writing academically and primary parenting is the necessity of concentration and the ability to multitask. When writing a dissertation or *Habilitation* as a non-primary parent, one is usually teaching, working on other manuscripts, applying for jobs or fellowships, etc. Yet one must keep the centrality of completing the large project foremost amongst one's priorities, or one simply will not finish. Similarly, one practices a kind of continuous triage as a mother: one chooses whether to first change the excrement-filled diaper or get

the warm food on the table for waiting, hungry older children, who need to go to practices. One decides whether it is more important to remove the imminent danger from the crawling baby's exploratory path or to attend more closely to the teacher who has called to speak about one's adolescent's problems at school. And one has to forcefully defend time for reading and writing. My ability to produce text has been due in no small part to a lifestyle that I would not ever have chosen. I was a single parent for several years and now live in a long-distance marriage. Being alone during the week has meant that I usually write at night while my children sleep.

By taking time off to have and nurture children, one risks missing out on other important career-enhancing activities. One fails to attend conferences and present research results. One loses benefits of networking with colleagues. One recognizes that what limited work time there is has to be divided between competing interests: selling one's ideas and publications, working on university commissions, researching and writing. Conflicts of time are real, insurmountable, and constant. While some efforts are being made in the United States and, more gradually, here in Germany to redress the disadvantages primary parents have in pursuing academic careers, the picture is at present bleak.

Women students often ask me whether it is possible to perform university work and be a mother. My unequivocal answer is, "Yes, certainly!" Yet it would be false to say that combining these endeavors is easy or that a mothering academic is as likely to succeed as her typical male colleague. I cite pertinent advice given to young women scientists: they will need to work hard, be highly resilient, publish their research, find good mentors, and achieve professional visibility; but they will also have to orchestrate having babies and making career moves carefully and they should choose discrimination battles wisely.[31] In other words, the going is tough: "On virtually any measure of outward achievement – pay, power, prestige, even job satisfaction – investing time and energy in motherhood is a recipe for marginalization."[32] This may be particularly true for mothers in academia.

It is not my intention to sound dire. Indeed, an essay about the difficulties of combining parenting with a university career may appear discordant in a volume that features a project which espouses the advantages of starting families during one's student years. Let me then say something more optimistic. Some of the palpable obstacles facing mothering academics may perversely be experienced as emancipating. For those primary parents who are invested in trying to 'make it' as academics, the sense of competition and pressure may be lessened, because one knows that one is playing the game by a different set of rules. The chances of success are so preposterously small that one cannot possibly count on a good outcome. Potentially, one may then feel freer to not take negative characteristics of academic life overly seriously. One sees a book proposal's being rejected by a publisher, an essay or an abstract's being turned down, or being overlooked by a more powerful colleague as par for the course. One cannot afford to be monomaniacal about one's career or overly sensitive about other people's perceived failures to recognize the worth

of one's work, because one has a demanding life outside of the ivory tower. As a woman taking place in a workshop on mothers in academia reports:

> There is something about starting ten yards behind everyone else at the starting line, and you're the only one pushing a double buggy. It's almost that you've put yourself in a different race, and so, consequently, to some extent, new rules can be made up: the cards are so stacked against you that you might as well be in control of your own life and live it in the best way that you can.[33]

III Concluding Thoughts

In the first part of this essay I wrote about powerful affective responses I have had as a mother, responses that bespeak a process of changing ethical values that many parents may undergo; the second part of this essay has concerned tangible handicaps involved in writing and achieving permanent academic employment as a mother. Yet what about the benefits of being a mother as one reads and writes academically? Recently, Daphne de Marneffe has argued that in the service of capitalism and "a certain strain of antidomesticity feminism," women's satisfaction and sense of self-actualization has been too one-sidedly equated with their ability to perform paid work.[34] Such a view ignores the palpable desire many women (and men) have to nurture infants and children and spend significant amounts of time doing so. When motherhood is connoted with passivity, a lack of agency, and a wish to avoid 'adult' work, then the ambivalence many women feel about wanting to be mothers will be silenced or denigrated as a cultural construction or a product of sentimentality. But parenting can be a joyous endeavor, and I deeply believe that it adds to one's profounder engagement in other types of work. In de Marneffe's own words:

> Children can, if we let them, expand our fellow feeling. As a friend said when I revealed years ago feeling wistful at the end of childbearing, "The point isn't whether you keep having children. It's being able to find a way for the experience of love that you have toward your own children, a love that feels like it can't be matched, to widen and deepen your love for others."[35]

This is the moment of an enhanced sense of one's responsibility to others that I referred to earlier in this essay. It is a transferring of the love one feels for the children one nurtures to the daughters and sons of others, even to the children of those individuals one dislikes or is indifferent to. This transference is, I believe, a quality often found lacking in the bitterly competitive atmosphere of academe and one that it behooves us to foster.

Measuring this quality is difficult. Even naming it has aroused some readers' sense that I am making a general statement about the higher moral development of parents. Similarly, quantifying robustness, well-roundedness and the ability to multitask or negotiate for writing time while taking care of people – all qualities

mentioned here as characteristics of primary parents – appears daunting. Yet cultivating well-rounded faculty members seems eminently worthwhile. It cannot be the prerogative of men to combine the pleasures of and the accrued experience involved in having children with the status of holding full professorships. It should not be the fate of women to have to choose between motherhood and the chance to hold a tenured academic position. Addressing the measurable obstacles that face mothers and male primary parents who try to achieve academic success and the potential benefits of opening the academe to these individuals' experience seems to me a goal well-worth working towards. And on this note, this essay moves from the realm of personal reflection into the claim for the need for political action.

Anmerkungen

1 My deep thanks go to Thomas Lederer, Benjamin Kohlmann and the editors of this volume for their critical and insightful readings of an earlier draft of this essay.

2 Note the current controversy about whether James Frey's having fictionalized the particularly dramatic details of his history as a drug addict and criminal in *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) renders his book no longer worth reading.

3 For an example of confessional criticism in which, to my mind, personal experience unduly suppresses critical reflection, see Leslie Heywood: *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*, Berkeley, CA 1996. Heywood cites her own experiences as an anorectic as the basis for her critique of what she views as the anorexia implicit in Modernist poetry as well as current academic practices. For a theoretical look at such critical practices, see H. Aram Veeser (ed.): *Confessions of the Critics*, New York/London 1996.

4 For the record, I do not believe in gender's being simply an acculturated, perfomative process, but espouse instead the notion of positive, embodied sexual difference as described, for instance, by Rosi Bradiotti: *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Cambridge 2002.

5 Keri Hulme: *The Bone People* [1983], London 1986, p. 56.

6 Ibid., p. 148.

7 As Otto Heim explicates the passage, her abuse of Simon, her disowning him with words, functions as painfully as do Joe's blows: *Writing Along Broken Lines: Violence and Ethnicity in Contemporary Maori Fiction*, Auckland, NZ 1998, p. 61.

8 Keri Hulme, London 1986, p. 326.

9 Pamela Dunbar: "Conflict and Continuity: The Family as Emblem of the Postcolonial Society," in: Wolfgang Zach/ Ken L. Goodwin (ed.): *Nationalism vs. Internationalism: (Inter)national Dimensions of Literatures in English,* Tübingen 1996, p. 105. For other readings of the novel's mythic-religious imagery, see Henke, Fox (2004), and Heim (2001).

10 Keri Hulme, London 1986, p. 4.

11 Tariana Turia: speech at a conference of the New Zealand Psychological Society in 2000, available at http://www.beehive.govt.nz/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentID=8466.

12 In an interview with Sandi Hall, Hulme reports: "I did four terms at Canterbury as a law student and about the same time as I started there was a notorious case in Christchurch where a bloke picked up his four-year-old and swung him by his heels and swung his head against the wall. The kid wound up a total vegetable and the bloke was sentenced to something really grotesque, like six months in jail, it was something that really caught people on the hop. Now at the same time as that, one of my schoolmates was sent to jail for embezzlement—for three years" (Sandi Hall, p. 18; as quoted in Otto Heim, Auckland,/NZ 1998, p. 72).

13 Pamela Dunbar notes insightfully that the juxtaposition of the realist narrating of Simon's being nearly beaten to death with the mythic story of death and cultural renewal is "an uncomfortable one," Tübingen 1996, p. 106.

14 As Stephen Fox argues, through Keri's reconnecting to the earth and her Maori family and providing a home for Joe and Simon, a new form of cultural hybridization and family-making takes place: "Barbara Kingsolver and Keri Hulme: Disability, Family, and Culture," in: *Critique* 45, No. 4. (Summer 2004): 417.

15 Keri Hulme, London 1986, p. 139.

16 "Fredericas Ausbruch aus ihrer *gender*-konformen Rolle wird lange Zeit durch das panoptische Starren aller Familienmitglieder verhindert": Stella Butter: "'Babbling Voices': Einheit und Differenz, fremde und eigene Stimme(n) in A. S. Byatts *Babel Tower*," in: Stefan Glomb/Stefan Horlacher (ed.): *Beyond Extremes: Repräsentation und Reflexion von Modernisierungsprozessen im zeitgenössischen britischen Roman.* Tübingen 2004, p. 354.

17 A. S. Byatt: *Babel Tower* [1996], London 2003, p. 468.

18 Mara Cambiaghi: "The Power of Fiction in A.S. Byatt's *Babel Tower*," in: *Symbolism* 3 (2003): 298.

19 On this subject see, for instance, Sharon Hays: *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, New Haven, 1996.

20 Cf. Steven D. Fox: "Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*: The Problem of Beneficial Child Abuse," in: *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 24, 1-3 (2003): 40-54.

21 Note that some practitioners of evolutionary psychology would argue that love of one's children is the most selfish of human responses, a consequence of the drive to see one's genes be propagated. Cf., for instance, John Cartwright: *Evolution and Human Behavior*, Suffolk 2000, p. 262.

22 These paragraphs are written in cognizance of debates within feminism about the ethics of care. To briefly recapitulate: Carol Gilligan challenged her teacher's Lawrence Kohlberg's hierarchy of ethical development in 1982 for judging women to be less morally developed than men due to their inability to make independent and autonomous moral judgments. Gilligan argued that women take a more 'relational' or contextual approach to moral problems by focusing on other people's needs rather than on abstract moral principles. Subsequently, criticism has been voiced at Gilligan's developmental model for its essentializing sexual difference and perpetuating the ideological separation of private (feminized relational) and public (masculinized and justice-oriented) spheres. For an overview of the arguments and central texts, see Moira Gatens (ed.): *Feminist Ethics,* Aldershot 1998.

23 See the figures published in the article about Mason and Goulden's study in Robin Wilson: "How Babies Alter Careers for Academics: Having children often bumps women off the tenure track, a new study shows," in: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (5 December 2003): Section: The Faculty, Volume 50, Issue 15, Page A1; also available at http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i15/15a00101.htm.

24 I am summarizing research work done by Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden in a project called "Do Babies Matter," which is based on data concerning 160,000 men and women who earned their doctorates between 1978 and 1984 and went on to work at the university. This work is described in "Marriage and Baby Blues: Re-defining Gender Equity"

and "Do Babies Matter (Part Two): Closing the Baby Gap."

25 Robin Wilson, (5 December 2003): n. pag.

26 Martin Spiewak: "Dr. habil. Kinderlos," *Die Zeit* 6 April 2006, Wissen, p. 43.

27 The figures I quote here are from Holger Krimmer/Freia Stallmann/Markus Behr/Annette Zimmer: "Karrierewege von ProfessorInnen an Hochschulen in Deutschland," Münster 2003; available at: http://www.mentoring.unizh.ch/literatur/wika_broschuere.pdf; cf. also Silvia Merganthal: "Frauen an deutschen Universitäten: Ein Fall von Nicht-Diversifikation?," in: Helmbrecht Breinig/Jürgen Gebhardt/Berndt Ostendorf (ed.): *Das deutsche und das amerikanische Hochschulsystem*, Münster 2001

28 Silvia Mergenthal, Münster 2001, pp.172-173.

29 On the collapsing of the categories of housework and mothering, see Daphne de Marneffe: *Maternal Desire*, New York 2004, pp. 38-42.

30 Pauline Leonard and Danusia Malina: "Caught Between Two Worlds: Mothers as Academics," in: Sue Davies/Cathy Lubelska/Jocey Quinn (ed.): *Changing the Subject: Women in Higher Education*, London 1994, p. 30.

31 Gerhard Sonnert: *Who Succeeds in Science? The Gender Dimension*, New Brunswick/NJ 1995, p.187.

32 Daphne de Marneffe, New York 2004, p. 125.

33 Pauline Leonard/Danusia Malina, London 1994, p. 36.

34 Daphne de Marneffe, New York 2004, p. 52.

35 Ibid., p. 332.

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