

## MOM, DAD, OTHER

ON AN AFTERNOON when we were a little more knee-deep in the after-effects of toddler tornado than usual, Will and I decided to put Sinclair, who was then seventeen months old, on the waitlist for a French-language preschool. Preschool would start when she was three.

When I looked up the preschool intake form and saw blank spaces only for *mère* and *père*, I let the tab languish, unattended, at the corner of my browser window. If I crossed out *mère*, I wasn't sure what I'd put in its place. I hadn't settled on a parent name. "Baba," which is probably the most common parental label used by non-binary people, means dad in multiple languages, and grandma in others; I didn't have a connection to it, and it felt culturally appropriative for me to borrow it. So I remained label-less.

At home, this didn't matter. Sinclair's first word, sometime between six and nine months, was "Boop!" At seventeen months, we were trying—

moderately unsuccessfully—to teach her to verbalize “yes” and “no.” She preferred to say “cheese,” “meow,” and “uh-oh.” When people asked us what parent names she used for us, we shrugged: we worked from home and were around her all the time. She hadn’t bothered to call us anything yet. By then, I’d resigned myself to going by my first name with adults who would be interacting with her regularly—friends, family, teachers. Will was thinking he’d go by Dad; I wondered if this would cause some momentary misunderstandings because people would assume that I was Sinclair’s dad’s partner, and not her parent. But neither of us wanted to restrict Will’s choice simply because there was nothing equivalent to Dad for me.

Labels are ubiquitous, contentious. The ones we’re comfortable with slide by like water, so common that we don’t even stop to think about them. It’s only when we add new ones, or incorporate the unfamiliar, that labels begin to chafe. A comment on a piece about non-binary parenthood I co-wrote a few years ago sums up the hetero lament: “Don’t you find all those labels divisive? Undermining? And reductive?” I really doubt that the person who wrote this stopped to wonder if calling their parents Mom and Dad was divisive, undermining, or reductive. Even if, perhaps, it was.

IN HETERO-PARENT FAMILIES, the words “Mom” and “Dad” generally delineate the roles each takes in the relationship, both with each other and with their kids. Although nothing is ever as simple as it appears, it remains true that for the majority of straight couples with kids, Mom handles the bulk of child care, housework, cooking, and household coordination, often while working; Dad works and pitches in with Mom’s duties. This seems exhausting, a situation in which parenthood both erodes one’s sense of

self for many mothers and shores up outdated gender roles for both parents. We expect more of Mom, we're intensely critical of Mom, and to Dad we assign the condescending burden of lowered expectations. (In capsule form, thanks to Zoe Whittall: "I just want to be as universally revered by everyone as the man who holds his own baby in a coffee shop.")

When you're a queer parent, there is no automatic delineation of roles; every family looks a little different, but somebody has to bathe the child, teach her to read, do the laundry. There's no falling back on cultural expectations, so a negotiation follows: What's important to you? What do you like, dislike? How will we share things in a way that seems fair and sustainable? For my partner and me, this negotiation extends from things that are more minor—I never vacuum and he rarely cooks dinner—to those that feel more meaningful. Our kid carries my last name, for example. And another of her first words was "butt," indicative of the fact that my partner has been her primary nine-to-five caregiver—I would have taught her, if I were changing the lion's share of diapers, to say "bum."

It feels surreal to be comfortable tackling the gendered expectations of parenthood but to have no warm, loving way to voice who you are to your own child. Non-binary folks have adopted pronouns like they and ze, to carve out space for ourselves in language. Parenting labels could use a similar revision—to establish terms that are recognized not only in queer communities but also more broadly in our culture.

I've learned you are the best parent to your kid when you take time to triage your own needs and wants alongside theirs. When I was pregnant in Montreal, I thought, for the sake of not appearing too "weird" or "difficult," that I could stomach nine months of *maman* and *madame* from medical professionals before returning to my real self. It's worth

noting that after Sinclair was born there was no change in gender presentation for me—I'm masculine-of-centre but often read, I think, as a queer or butch woman—but rather a return to being more assertive about pronouns, honorifics, titles, and the assumptions people make about my family structure.

But then, it wasn't that simple: as the parent of a young kid, your "real self" is more often than not necessarily tethered to your relationship with your child and the way that relationship is read in the world.

ON THE FERRY FROM HORSESHOE BAY in West Vancouver to Langdale on the Sunshine Coast, I often walk up and down the aisles with Sinclair, who likes to stop and make new friends. It is bewildering the number of grown adults who talk to her, referring to me, in the third person, as Mom. Since I am the same person who often receives a quick gender-check on my way into the women's bathroom on those same ferries, my guess is that this happens to me now for the same reason it happened when I was pregnant: pregnancy and child care are seen as inherently feminine acts, most often associated with women. Being spoken about in the third person while I was immediately present was not something that occurred to me nearly as often pre-parenthood. I've considered buying "they/she" pins (I'm comfortable with both pronouns) and carpeting my body with them, but I don't know if it would help. Maybe a "Not the mama" iron-on?

The experience of being misgendered in this way comes with the added weight of feminism, despite its best efforts, having managed to undermine less the idea of "motherhood" than it has something like "woman." While feminism has tried to move the needle on gendered divisions of labour in parenting, we are still culturally stuck in 101-level conversations

about mothering and fathering—school pickups, caregiving, household management. “Motherhood” is a field that has not expanded nearly as much as “woman.” Because I present as masculine, I don’t deal with garden-variety sexism—catcalls, assumptions about work-related competency, sexual harassment—nearly as often as feminine women. Having a kid, though, has undermined that, reinscribing both a womanhood that doesn’t suit me and the corresponding binaristic ideas we hold about parenting.

Case in point: another common refrain, when I travel alone and a stranger learns that I have a toddler, is “Who’s taking care of her?!” Once, an older man followed up with “You trust him to do that?” When people call me Mom, I dissociate for a moment before returning to my well-worn body. But when they ask me what I’ve done with my child in order to travel away from her, I leave an accidental long pause, unable to get to the premise of the question nearly quickly enough.

Gender was also something we considered when it came time to choose Sinclair’s name; before we even conceived, we’d narrowed our list to names that could work for a girl, boy, or non-binary kid. In raising her, we’re hopefully creating the circumstances where she’ll feel free to be herself. But it’s conversations like the ones we have ad nauseam while travelling and in other public spaces that led us to choose the path of least resistance when it came to her pronouns—statistically, she’s more likely to align with the gender she was assigned at birth, and I know from personal experience that “they” is still somewhat of a social burden to carry, one I wouldn’t feel comfortable imposing. We’ll change to suit Sinclair’s needs if and when she shares a different preference.

The year after Sinclair was born, people wished me a happy Mother's Day, and a little piece of me felt like it had been hole-punched out. My loved ones weren't being harmful on purpose, but it actually felt worse than when a stranger misgendered me: I wondered if I wasn't legibly trans enough, if I hadn't made myself known, if I could correct someone I cared for deeply for the twenty-fourth time without causing harm to our relationship. I wondered how people thought about me, talked about me, when I wasn't around. (Was my request for gender-neutral kinship terms seen as something quirky, rather than something foundational?)

It hurts, but I recognize that it's a problem that's both interpersonal and cultural—it wouldn't be as hard for friends and family to conceive of me correctly if they'd grown up in a place that made space for me. In a place that had a parental term for me, like it has for most people. I deeply hope that all the recent mainstream discussions about trans identities and queer identities has brought some understanding, some shift that will make it easier for the generations of queer parents who follow us.

THANKFULLY, THE ACTUAL EXPERIENCE of being a non-binary parent to my child is worlds apart from my interactions with others as a parent. My kid cares about being loved, about snacking, about going outside, about reading books. I love her, I give her snacks, we go outside, I read her books. And when I asked my partner if he'd be a different dad if it wasn't for me—if he'd ended up with a woman, someone comfortable with mothering—he said no. The whole point of having a kid, he said, is to raise her.

I'm not sure if I am queering parenthood just by being a parent. I guess I am if I'll be asking my kid's schools to edit their intake forms so that there's a space for me to put my name, to render myself a bureaucratic

part of her world on top of being a daily cornerstone of it. There are days when I don't think about the ways in which being non-binary and being a parent intersect, mesh, and clash, when my top priorities include picking all the fish-shaped cheese crackers off the floor and making sure the toddler doesn't do a header off a kitchen chair. And then there are others when my internal monologue is the Manifesto of the Happily Boring Queer Parent: I need the world to make just enough space for me that I can become completely unremarkable.