

Brenda Clews

The Notebook of the Maternal Body

Here it is a question of writing *in language* of a foreclosure that institutes language itself: How to write in such a way that what escapes the full force of disclosure and what constitutes its displacement can be read in the gaps, fissures, and metonymic movements of the text?

—Judith Butler (1993: 197-8)

My body's an empty shuddering sac,
mammoth, aching, sweating on the bed in the
sheets in which we live day and night.

The maternal body is taboo.

A rotund, mountainous mother,
cradling my baby to these swollen breasts.

A maternal rhythm of blood
and milk flows...

I have lost my contours. I do not know
whose body I inhabit.

While many of us may not feel *comfortable* with our bulky bodies, our bodies that do not reflect the male “anima,” that are de-sexed (although pregnant women are highly orgasmic), that do not portray the svelte, sporty, independent-seeming “woman” so emblazoned on our collective psyche, while most of us may feel awkwardly elephantine and yet buried in the obscuring enculturated mirrors, we must rise from those depths with our mammoth bodies, bodies producing and sustaining life, and celebrate.

Morphogenesis: Giving form to what has been construed as formless, fearful, even chaos-producing, and therefore hidden not just behind planes of mirrors, walls, but behind embarrassments.

A morphology of the maternal? As if it were a terrain...

A hidden terrain of which there are only sightings, hints...

...“having released our minds from subjection to a neutral symbolic, we had released the power of the maternal...”

“the presence of a female source of value ... [yet] there is the danger of representing it as a female duplicate of the authority of male origin.”
(The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, 1990:111)

The chatter of mothers, sharing the work of raising the world, is not in the texts, is banished from the canon, is an other discourse hidden from the acts of cultural memory. It is not found in important conversation.

That huge belly poking into the world, walking down the street, sitting at the dinner table, the puffed face above it, surrounded, limited, contained by embarrassments, by discretions, by polite talk of forthcoming motherhood/babies, by ironic stories of parenting that attempt to distance and somehow taint or degrade the experience, to contain the uncontainable, to depotentiate the power of the woman whose womb carries the embryo of the world in it. To force her away from her own experience: her own body/her own language.

We are left utterly changed on the other side of it, whether we have one child or a stream of them, we never return. But you find that while you have no words to describe this in-itself and for itself, you do have a sharing with other women, an often unarticulated mutual understanding.

“They were not inclined,” adds Martins, “to disturb the past which brought feelings of sadness and depression.” One elderly woman told her, “If I can’t tell the whole truth I’d rather not tell the story.” We can therefore imagine a second narrative, running alongside these stories and in counterpoint to them, in which the women either have not found accommodating strategies for their anger and pain, or in which they’ve accommodated so much that their voices have been suppressed altogether. This second narrative is an important one to remember when reading these stories, indeed, it is an echo that informs all Western literature, a gap in the cultural text we’ve inherited, the background against which the mother story must be constructed.” (Di Brandt, 1993:145)

into the folds

There is a “woman’s world” where a man can never enter. The world of the mothers. It is a world whose existence I was completely unaware of before becoming a mother. Even during my first pregnancy I noticed how I was being “accepted into” “included in.” This level of interconnectedness between other mothers and me, who was about to become one, was something that never occurred before. Bearing a child into the world is an initiation into

into “that” world
of women who are mothers
who know who have an interconnection that is based on the experience of motherhood who have a language that refers to it so much unsaid yet felt in the speech of women between women it is a comforting world where you, your tiredness, your joy exists empathetic not threatening or judgmental a sharing so few words for it

“Zizek argues that the “subject” is produced in language through an act of foreclosure...What is refused or repudiated in the formation of the subject, set outside by the act of foreclosure which founds the subject, persists as a kind of defining negativity. The subject is, as a result, never coherent and never self-identified precisely because it is founded, and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject.”
(Butler, 1993:189-90)

What is it that the mother is saying in her speaking of frustration, exhaustion, a speaking that always dwindles into incoherence and silence?

Are there simply massive and internalized social controls against this speaking?

membranes and folds

membranes and folds

placental nutrients building the first
cells

The primary enfolding
of the brain
— embedded

like living sea coral

nourished on breast milk

The maternal encoded in
the membranes of the brain
archaic layers
imprinted with life's
earliest experiences

The first structuring
principle organizing
the folding and folding
over and over until
its creativity, impetus into
form, is forgotten...

Brenda Clews

References

- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter*. Boston: Routledge.
- Brandt, Di. 1993. *Wild Mother Dancing*. Manitoba: University of Manitoba.
- The Milan Woman's Bookstore Collective. 1990. *Sexual Difference*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.