

Bearing Meaning: The Language of Birth

Robbie Pfeufer Kahn

Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998

Reviewed by Deborah Whatley

It has only been approximately within the last twenty years that social history and feminist scholarship have begun to change the written record to include women as producers and reproducers, both of which influence historical processes. Robbie Pfeufer Kahn reminds us that, ironically, the Latin root for "text" is *texere*, meaning "woven thing," which is a productive process in which women have participated throughout recorded history. While texts belonging to the canon of Western tradition "attack," bifurcate and dismember the maternal body, as do medical protocols and practices, Kahn's text articulates what she calls "languages of birth," as she re-members the maternal body through its embodied experiences. Revisiting history from the rise of abstract thought in classical Greece to the present, Kahn weaves a tapestry that illustrates a woman's body as one that is "not a body that is not a man's."

Kahn's tapestry is woven from four main threads. With the first, she discusses attitudes toward birth in texts from Western tradition. The second connects culture to society by examining the relationship between this tradition, with its "relentlessly patriarchal character," and current birth protocols and practices in the United States. The third thread weaves counterstories with the dominant canonical texts of modern medicine. Kahn's fourth thread introduces her own experiences by sounding her personal narrative as a mother, former childbirth activist, and scholar, against other narratives. Embodying contributions of sociologists from the West as well as from other parts of the globe, her framework for understanding 'the sociological' includes conceptions of structure, and agency, as well as biological, social, and spiritual nature.

While Kahn is proficient in weaving the representations of others into her tapestry, she also offers her readers a concept of her own. Understanding the most problematic aspect of the maternal body as its tie to the child, she introduces the neologism *maialogical*, as a theoretical articulation of the mother-child dyad and the dialectical process of childbearing and building knowledge grounded in the body. This perspective argues for the unification of the biological, social, and spiritual natures; for a social structure that gives maximum freedom to agency and nature; for a culture of the justborn (which recognizes the unrepresented and unworded voices of the very young); and offers a framework by which to examine cultural products to see how texts represent the three natures and relations among agency, structure, and nature.

Rich in context and replete with references, Kahn's text can be read as a textbook, handbook, and personal memoir interwoven with cogent and dili-

gent sociological analysis. While she weaves personal narrative and self-reflexivity, she does so without self-indulgence. In her effort to rethink women and produce text, she is determined not to “reproduce the splits of Western descriptions of reality and not to replace one single-focused view with another” (36). To this end, or more aptly a beginning, she draws on social theory, psychoanalysis, feminist thought, ecological perspectives, and spiritual traditions. She is meticulous in her detail and description of terms and concepts, making the book accessible and relevant for both the academic and women’s health activist reader, as well as anyone interested in maternity.

Men have been the prime movers of historical process, and creators of the master symbols of Western culture as compensatory for their alienation from natural processes such as birth and lactation. For Kahn, “a new language of birth means making the intact maternal body visible in words on paper and describing the knowledge derived from it” (6). Although abstract knowledge and language have been repositories of patriarchal power relations, Kahn did not take up the challenge of the language and progeny of knowledge as presumed masculine, even by feminists who fail to reflect on their use of the term “disseminate.” Rather than a minor criticism of her text, this omission is further recognition of the need for such texts.

“What a Blessing She Had Chloroform”: The Medical and Social Response to the Pain of Childbirth from 1800 to the Present

Donald Caton
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999

Reviewed by Gina Camodeca

I recently threw a party where the conversation turned toward childbirth. Of the three women present, two (myself included) were pregnant. The husband of the third woman began to brag about his wife’s having given birth twenty years earlier without painkillers. His wife shushed him, while I and the other expectant mother squirmed. I’m a proponent of “natural childbirth”; the other soon-to-be mother praises epidurals and jokes that she wishes she could have one for her entire third trimester. We all sensed that the conversation might become political. Undeniably, the management of childbirth is a contentious issue with which not just individual women, but also their societies, are concerned.

In *What a Blessing She Had Chloroform*, Donald Caton, an obstetric anesthesiologist, suggests that childbirth management has been polemical