

Alicia Ostriker's Propaganda for Motherhood

In western culture, pregnancy and childbirth have been conceptualized, sometimes even by feminists, in ways that limit or deprive women of subjectivity. Since the 1960s a number of American women poets have been re-imagining motherhood, and more specifically pregnancy and childbirth, in ways that challenge existing constructions of these experiences. This paper discusses one such challenge, which is atypical in its overtly rhetorical nature. Alicia Ostriker wrote "Propaganda Poem: Maybe for Some Young Mamas" in reaction to an incident that occurred in the 1970s when, after reading her pregnancy poem to a group of women students who equated mothering to oppression, she was scorned. Her poem addresses these students and attempts to revise their conceptions of maternity and feminism. Ostriker presents a model of the mother/infant dyad that opposes both the medical model and the "feminist" model held by Ostriker's students. Ostriker explicitly explores the concept of love for an infant child, subtly infusing an element of sensuality into this relationship. Knowing that this description of love is insufficient to convince her students, the poet climaxes her "propaganda" by reversing the girls' notions of power and resistance. Although the poet aims to convince, she is honest and thus writes the "Postscript To Propaganda," where she recognizes some of the physical and emotional hardships of motherhood. "Propaganda Poem" moves from an idealized picture of motherhood, to a largely negative portrayal and finally in part three, "What Actually," to a more realist conclusion, where Ostriker attempts to present her ideological point of view, according to which, choice is the key word in re-imagining motherhood.

In western culture, pregnancy and childbirth have been conceptualized, sometimes even by feminists, in ways that limit or deprive women of subjectivity. Pregnancy and childbirth have been objectified, naturalized, essentialized, sentimentalized, concealed, ignored, idealized, and appropriated. These dan-

gers to pregnant subjectivity and the longstanding equation of the feminine *and* the female with motherhood have brought about the need for a re-imagination of the pregnant and birthing woman. For women writers and poets this need is even more intense, for historically women have had to choose between babies and books, between procreation and creation, and the presumption that any creative drives will be fulfilled through mothering still lingers.

Since the 1960s a number of American women poets, among them Muriel Rukeyser, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Alicia Ostriker, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, and Sharon Olds, have been re-imagining motherhood, and more specifically pregnancy and childbirth, in ways that challenge existing constructions of these experiences. In this paper I shall discuss one such early challenge, which is atypical in its overtly rhetorical nature, and bears relevance even today.

Alicia Ostriker, one of America's foremost poet-critics, has consistently and repeatedly drawn on her experience of the maternal throughout her poetic career. If, she states, "the woman artist has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to the main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself" (1983: 131). Ostriker describes how rather during pregnancy she arrived at an incomparable profundity:

During pregnancy ... I believed from time to time that I understood the continuity of life and death, that my body was a city and a landscape, and that I had personally discovered the moral equivalent of war. (1983: 127)

Pregnancy also marked for Ostriker the "extraordinary sensation of transformation from being a private individual self to being a portion of something else" (1983: 127). This awareness of maternity as connecting the self to others, whether to her children, her students or the larger political and historical realm is the dominant strain in her pregnancy poetry.

Yet, despite her conviction that carrying children, birthing them and mothering them are acts that ultimately strengthen the intersubjective self, Ostriker is painfully aware of the simultaneous risks to selfhood that accompany motherhood. She states:

...existence is never the same afterward, when you have put yourself, as de Beauvoir correctly says, in the service of the species. You no longer belong to yourself. Your time, energy, body, spirit and freedom are drained. (1983: 130)

When one begins in pregnancy the physical process of ceasing to be a "private individual self," one undoubtedly experiences some sense of losing a degree of autonomy and independence. One gains at the same time though a heightened awareness of connection because of the complicated physical bonds

that tie one to another inextricably and permanently. This primary self/other relationship moreover teaches one, through the body, about being a self who is intersubjective, who has tangible links with others. The positive and negative experience of being connected in this way, starting in pregnancy, climaxing in childbirth and continuing through motherhood, is a central concern in Ostriker's pregnancy and childbirth poetry.

However, when Ostriker (1980) attempted to convey this sense of the complex but ultimately rewarding experience of motherhood to her students—"reading the girls my old pregnancy poem / that I thought was ripe and beautiful"—in the 1970's, when feminism equated childbearing to oppression, she was scorned and, she reports, "if looks could kill I would/ have been one dead duck in that/ so-called 'feminist' classroom." The negative reaction of her students, to whom Ostriker has said herself to be "maternally motivated," prompted her to write "Propaganda Poem: Maybe for Some Young Mamas" (1980). In this poem she addresses the "young girls in a classroom" who want "to live our lives" without "the burden the responsibility/ the disgusting mess" of motherhood, and attempts to explain the meaning of maternity to them. Ostriker does not simply launch into her "propaganda" but attempts, almost physically, to identify and understand her students: "I leaned and strained towards you, trying to understand/ what you were becoming." Her identification with them has at its root a hope that they will also identify with her.

Ostriker's students with their "smooth skins" and "good American bodies" seem to have been educated in the existentialist school of feminism promoted most notably by proto-feminist Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir is actually an example of how not only western culture but even certain feminists have, sometimes ambivalently sometimes enthusiastically, conceptualized pregnancy as purely natural and biological. While Ostriker might agree with Beauvoir's central thesis in *The Second Sex* (1953) that man has made woman into the Other, she certainly disputes many passages in Beauvoir's work that suggest that women's subordinate position has its source in her ability to bring forth children: "... in maternity woman remained closely bound to her body, like an animal." (97).

Much debate exists around the question of Beauvoir's devaluation of the maternal body, and the role that biology plays in women's subordinate position. Certainly both her detractors and her admirers make powerful arguments. I see myself in the middle, with those who recognize Beauvoir's ambiguity or, I prefer, ambivalence: "She hesitates, goes this way and that ..." (Leon, 1995: 152). What does seem clear, however, is that Beauvoir's negative comments surrounding the biology of menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation cannot be explained away so easily.

Even as Beauvoir insists that biology is not destiny, she draws a grim and detailed picture of woman's biological alienation in her reproductive functions. For example: "... gestation is a *fatiguing* task of *no individual benefit* to the woman ..." (1953: 33, my emphasis). Childbirth, she goes on to state, "is

painful and dangerous ... the infant ... in being born it may kill its mother ... (33, my emphasis). The nursing mother, says Beauvoir, “feeds the newborn from the resources of her own vitality...” (34). Beauvoir summarizes her thoughts on reproduction as follows: “It has been well said that women ‘have infirmity in the abdomen’; and it is true that they have within them a hostile element—it is the species gnawing at their vitals” (34). It seems fair to say then that for Beauvoir and later for Shulamith Firestone—whose controversial *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) focuses on practical ways to escape what Beauvoir saw as the immanence of the reproductive female body—woman’s reproductive ability is the source of her oppression and leads to the obliteration of her subjectivity. It is not surprising that Beauvoir opted not to bear children. In Ostriker’s (1980) opinion, re-imagining and confronting maternity rather than escaping it, is the way to tackle the problematic areas of reproduction and their representation.

And so, she attempts to convey to these thoroughly “feminist” students the uniqueness of having children, through a description of the mother/baby dyad in pregnancy:

one animal
and both gently just slightly
separated from each other
swaying, swinging
like a vine, like an oriole nest
keep returning to each other

These lines tackle the meaning of otherness within the self and thus of the borders of identity of the pregnant woman. The mother/fetus unit is “one animal,” a single entity, yet within this one “both” exist “just slightly separated from each other.” Tess Cosslett (1994) is correct in pointing out that the metaphors do not allow a clear distinction between mother and fetus. Thus Cosslett asks: “Is the mother the vine, holding up the nest? But the baby clings to her like a vine, and she is the nest for the baby” (120). The undecidability of these metaphors, together with the gentle “swaying, swinging” strengthen the sense of harmony and mutuality between both entities in the pregnant unit. Contrary to the medical model, according to which the fetus is almost awarded subjectivity and mother becomes fetal incubator, and the “feminist” model held by Ostriker’s students wherein the woman is the all-important subject who is threatened by a parasitic child (Cosslett, 1994: 120), Ostriker’s (1980) “one animal” model—“the dazzling circuit of contact without dominance”—challenges any either/or or hierarchical models.

In “Propaganda Poem” Ostriker explicitly explores the concept of love for an infant child in a way that confirms Julia Kristeva’s (1986) sense of the unique dynamic between child and mother—“the slow, difficult and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself” (174). Ostriker,

however, subtly infuses an element of sensuality into this relationship, which she describes in this poem as “better than sex.” Thus she urges her students:

and I want you to think about touching
and the pleasure of touching
and being touched by this most perfect thing
this pear tree blossom
this mouth these leafy hands these genitals
like petals

By framing “touching” by a space the poet invites the reader to give pause to imagine, to feel that unique type of touch, the space, reminding us to re-think our notions of pleasurable touch. The language is sensual in that the repetition of “touching,” “the pleasure of touching,” and “being touched” causes the reader to imagine the sensation. The metaphor of the “pear tree blossom” invokes an image of nature, freshness, innocence, rebirth and potential. These associations undercut the following line that calls to mind touching of a usually erotic nature: mouth, “leafy hands” and genitals/ like petals.” Thus the overall sense is not one of sexuality, but of a vastly sensual touch and highly pleasurable, innocent warmth.

In a short prose piece in Ostriker’s *The Mother/Child Papers* (1980) entitled “Letter to M,” Ostriker expands on this notion of a mother’s physical pleasure, especially during nursing, which she calls “one of the most pleasurable things it is possible for a human to do” (33) and wonders why she has never encountered a discussion of this experience:

why do we not say this? Why are mothers always represented sentimentally, as having some sort of altruistically self-sacrificing “maternal feelings,” “as if they did not enjoy themselves? Is it so horrible that we enjoy ourselves: another love that dare not tell its name? (1980: 33)

In these short lines Ostriker taps into another aspect of maternal subjectivity: that of physical pleasure disconnected from the sexual act between man and woman. The context for Ostriker is breastfeeding, but her discussion of sensuality recalls Iris Marion Young’s theoretical exploration of pregnant subjectivity, where she maintains that the pregnant woman “may find herself with a heightened sense of her own sexuality” (1984: 53) and thus enjoy “an innocent narcissism” (53). This sensual, but at the same time innocent, enjoyment of the maternal body and the self-awareness and self-satisfaction that accompany it strengthen pregnant subjectivity. This is especially true in the face of a cultural expectation, articulated by Ostriker (1980), that the maternal body be asexual, and naturally, selflessly inclined to perform the physical burdens of motherhood.

Sexuality is the chief influence on definitions of mothers as good or bad.

Catherine Stimpson (1993) explains: "...the good mother, who transforms sexual desire into reproductive bounty is pure. The bad mother, whose libido is imperfectly restrained ... is impure, even diabolically so" (316). The construction of the pregnant woman as beautiful, angelic, and *especially unsexed* has silenced her perhaps as much as her construction as abject. The separation of pregnancy/motherhood and sexuality is a cornerstone of patriarchy, as Freud attests in his diagnosis of the mother/whore syndrome in his famous essay "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life" (1950). There he claims that men, aiming at all costs to preserve the mother's purity, deflect all sexual feelings onto another degraded object. Ostriker in her poem "The Cambridge Afternoon was Grey" (1995) portrays the forbidden nature of erotic pleasure in any facet of maternity. She describes how, on revealing her "hot breast," which "ran up to you like a dog/ to a younger dog it wants to make friends with" in excited anticipation of nursing her baby, "the scandalized aide had to pull the grey/curtains around our bed, making a sound of hissing virtue...."

This "sound of hissing virtue" takes a different form in the revulsion of the young women in Ostriker's (1980) class ("I see you shudder truly") and their resulting rejection of motherhood. Ostriker thus continues her attempt to convince them that freedom from motherhood will not necessarily bring them pleasure, but that having a baby might: her simple line "...there is no/good time like the good time a whole mama/ has with a whole little baby...." Moreover says the poet, and here the "propaganda" climaxes by reversing the girls' notions of power and resistance, the disassociation of motherhood from feminism is a mistake. Rather a positive, enjoyable motherhood can empower a woman, who "is acceptable if she is/ weak/acceptable if she is a victim" or an "angry victim" or acceptable even if she is "a deodorized sanitized sterilized antiperspirant/ grinning efficient woman...." It is the satisfied mother, the embodiment of fertility and the "joy that hurts nobody/ the dazzling circuit of contact without dominance" that is threatening, for it represents something magnificent and pleasurable that men cannot do:

But who can tolerate the power of a woman
close to child, riding our tides
into the sand dunes of the public spaces.

Throughout the poem sand represents grittiness, aridity, barrenness and emptiness ("why are you made of sand") while maternity is associated with water ("a little wave"), sustenance ("flowing sap"), greenness and fruitfulness. These final lines betray the threat that accompanies the powerful life force as it enters the barren, male-dominated "public spaces."

These final words of the first part of this poem are seemingly the culmination of the propaganda. However, the poet, although her aim is to convince the girls, cannot be dishonest, and thus writes the "Postscript To Propaganda." This demonstrates that re-imagination of pregnancy has little to

do, even in a propaganda poem, with representing a rosy picture of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. In a short prose piece “Paragraphs,” Ostriker (1980) starkly emphasizes the importance of recognizing the difficulties of motherhood:

If I fail to acknowledge my will to murder the child, to wipe him like a spill from a counter—then all I call my love will evaporate, will choke. (33)

Adrienne Rich (1977), in her groundbreaking *Of Woman Born*, discusses the rage and violent fantasies—“the heart of maternal darkness”—of mothers, including herself. At length, Rich presents the dangers of censoring these feelings, of not somehow dealing with them: self-hate, repressed rage, guilt, depression, desperation, and even violence directed against children.

“Postscript to Propaganda” thus openly recognizes and enumerates some of the hardships of motherhood. For example:

That they whine until you want to murder them. That their beauty prevents you. That their eating and excreting exactly resembles the slime-trails of slugs. On your knees you follow, cleaning, unstaining....

Performing these tasks you feel: “your life peeling away/ from you like layers of cellophane.” Yet the menial jobs of mothers are nothing to the emotional toil they endure: “when your child grieves, mother/ you bend and grieve.” This skewed identification, commencing in pregnancy with bodily identification, continues throughout motherhood with an emotional identification that involves not only love and affection, but pain and frustration. Rich painfully and eloquently describes the painful inescapability of this identification:

To suffer with and for and against a child – maternally, egoistically, neurotically ... but always everywhere, in body and soul, *with* that child – because that child is a piece of oneself. (1970: 22)

Julia Kristeva (1986) agrees, suggesting that pregnancy and childbirth bring on an intense and constant pain that issues from becoming a mother:

But the pain, its pain—it comes from inside, never remains apart, other, it inflames me at once, without a second’s respite. As if that was what I had given birth to and, not willing to part from me, insisted in coming back, dwelled in me permanently. One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain: the child represents it and henceforth it settles in, continuous. (179)

To be the autonomous, rational, individualistic self that Ostriker's students strive to be—"we want our freedom and we want it now"—is far easier than being related in this painful way. To be a relational being is to feel pain, not only one's own, but "its pain," the child's pain, the other's pain, as if it were one's own. True empathy is a central axis of intersubjective, ethical relations.

Like an Aristotelian thesis, antithesis and synthesis model, "Propaganda Poem" moves from an idealized picture of motherhood, to a largely negative portrayal and finally in part three, "What Actually," to a more realist conclusion. In part three, which reads almost like prose, Ostriker (1980) attempts to present her ideological point of view, not so much to the girls anymore, but to herself and all her readers. To sum it up she says:

... It is the unanimity that offends me.
The ideological lockstep, that cannot permit women, humans,
simply to choose for themselves.

Overlapping somewhat with *Of Woman Born* in terms of dates, this poem's ideological message is strikingly similar to that of Rich, even though it is a reaction not only against patriarchy, as is Rich's book, but a reaction also against a breed of feminism that thinks that "motherhood is the sinister invention/ of patriarchy." Ostriker and Rich agree that choice is the key word in re-imagining motherhood. It is not motherhood, but the institution of compulsory motherhood, or the stereotypes of "mother" that can inflict such damaging wounds on the personhood of a woman. Ostriker explicitly undermines any notion of biological determinism that casts all women as mothers, saying: "I believe that some of us are born to be mamas ... some born not to be. Some in/ the middle."

Rich (1977) concludes her book with the hope that the compulsory patriarchal institution of motherhood, and what Ostriker (1980) calls the unanimity or "ideological lockstep," can be destroyed. In its place a re-imagined conception of maternity would emerge:

To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work. (280)

Ostriker closes her poem by returning to an image of the young women in the classroom, probing with questions addressed them, to herself and to her readers:

... Were there maybe a few young mamas sitting
in that classroom in the winter light, subdued, their codes
inaudible? Were they afraid to choose? Have we not explained

to the young that choice equals risk? Wanted to tell them to
decode themselves ...

... Wanted to tell them, mamas or not mamas, we all get
damaged when put to use, ...

Her painful skewed identification with them, her “maternal motivation” towards them, present throughout the poem, is palpable in her urgent questioning, her repetition of “wanted to tell them” and her use of “we,” which forges a connection between them, her and the reader. Most importantly, the emphasis on choice awards agency to a woman who takes upon herself the activity or project of childbearing and rearing. Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick (1994) confirms Ostriker’s sense that “choice equals risk” and that “resentments, ambivalences and fears”(39) may be part of that choice. However, by choosing to have a child a woman claims “pregnancy and childbirth as an expression of herself . . . rather than as an alien condition or social expectation to which she submits.” (39)

Although written almost three decades ago, Ostriker’s propaganda remains relevant and even necessary in attempting to deconstruct the binaries that divide babies from books, and motherhood from creativity. Her poem also reveals much about the evolving attitudes of feminism towards motherhood and alerts us to the importance of examining ideologies and theories with a critical eye. Sometimes, Ostriker tells us in “What Actually,” “we paint ourselves wrong.” She warns against “self-serving, self-pitying rhetoric” that undermines the ability of women to choose the kinds of lives that will fulfill them. Hers is not an attack on feminist theory, but a move to look beyond the “garbage we all shovel” to a place where women can “decode themselves” to understand the power and joy of motherhood.

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