

A Womb of her Own: Women's Struggle for Sexual and Reproductive Autonomy ed. by Ellen Toronto, JoAnn Ponder, Kristin Davisson, Maurine Kelber Kelly 2017 London : Routledge. pp. 242.

Reviewed by Rosemary Balsam.

Sad to say for women, this book is timely in our present governmental political climate that strives to be retrogressive, in the United States. The authors address society's and individuals' ongoing resistance to females' basic human rights to have dominion over their own bodies and minds. This same deep story goes back at least to the ancient Greeks -- especially regarding male assumptions of co-opting the separateness of females to possess their bodies (and minds) sexually and procreatively. Women themselves can echo that desire as their perceived best survival strategy. Thomas Laqueur in 1990, in "Making Sex: From the Greeks to Freud," wrote of the "one-sex" theory that was the medical tradition up till about the 19th century when, for example, women's ovaries were still called "testes." In *Women's Bodies in Psychoanalysis* 2012, I expanded this societally collusive and strange notion, to claim the nefariousness of the one-sex fantasy's tenacity is/was due to its *unconscious* power, showing even in our contemporary psychoanalyses. This shows in the pervasive clinical evidence of the *absence* in most post-Freudian modern psychoanalysis of extensive interest in the adult female body on the couch. Analysts often bask in received assumptions that all the unconscious imagery offered is infantile, and therefore must signify comparative "lack" compared to men. This attitude vividly shifts if the analyst's consciousness is raised to hear the actual power and intensity of female reproductive imagery-- much of which is just as ambitious, striving and exultant as the familiar equivalent phallic imagery. The "radical" idea seems to be that there may actually be two separate and equal biological sexes to be taken into account, (that are *potentially* integratable with the many individually scripted genders.)

It is affirmative but no surprise then, that the tragically abiding struggles in society and individual hostility generated by seeing and experiencing "female" as negative "otherness," to be controlled, aggressively mastered and regulated qua female, can be readily exemplified and explored in relation to social history, the law and institutions, and gathered into such a wonderful contemporary volume as this. This collection also encompasses and examines the complex psychic processes that result in many of the contemporary discomforts of being female, and inhabiting the female body in a recalcitrant society today.

The editors Ellen Toronto, JoAnn Ponder, Kristin Davisson and Maurine Kelber Kelly have done an excellent job of covering a lot of territory while maintaining a nice balance between offering conceptual guidelines and structure as well as the intimate individuality of the mind's functioning. People at every level in the mental health profession can benefit from reading these essays, and I recommend them also as good teaching texts for seminars in psychiatric residencies and psychotherapy and analytic training programs.

The book is arranged in four sections, and each is introduced by one of the four editors. They deal serially with the culture of oppression as an overview; women and sexual trauma; women defining motherhood; and the therapist as mother, and vice versa. The thirteen contributors are all female except for one male author, who brings a gay male

perspective to women's reproductive rights that is arresting. Eleven of the writers are psychologists, and two social workers. Most are psychoanalysts, with a few psychotherapists and academicians, all from sophisticated cities across the United States – from New York to Los Angeles. Division 39 of the American Psychological Association is well represented here. Jo-Ann Ponder, one of the editors, brings up the regretted absence of mental health workers of color, or lesbian topics. The papers are consistently dedicated, knowledgeable and contain much cogent and serious discussion. My sense is that the psychoanalytic orientation is pretty consistently relational, or ego oriented object relational, consequently this group of authors is likely quite in sync with one another. There are no dissenters, or no contributions remarkable in their oddity from the others. A virtue of this (relative) professional homogeneity is that one sees a consistent liberal vision of a better hope for society's future. A reader feels that these patient dilemmas for which society partially is responsible, are in very good therapeutic hands. The downside, though, is that the progress implied in the struggle may be too optimistic. One wonders about the mental comforts and discomforts of those women in also large vocal groups who, say, legally *oppose* abortion, or the contemporary “@Me too” movement that calls out unwanted male sexual behaviors towards women. If they too could be included it would be ideal. For therapists of different political persuasions, each side of the fence provides psychodynamic transference and countertransference challenges, sometimes new perspectives, and the ability to accumulate more detail about the struggle between them.

A feature of the writing style of this book is that a number of the authors tell their own stories as a method of dramatizing their points. I know that this is characteristic of newer interactional psychoanalytic trends that are less rigid about “non-disclosure” than in past eras (knowing that our patients also read such books.) It is in addition, a hallmark of modern academic feminist writing. Chapter 11, “Get a Grip”, in this vein, is extraordinarily moving, compelling and beautifully written – Kristin Reale's writing on her own postpartum depression. The pain of her fall from denial and illusion broke my heart to read. It is a rare and uncommon gift of greater understanding that this writer gives to her reader, and especially this chapter should be part of the education of those who have a solely neurobiological take on postpartum depression. I congratulate the editors on its inclusion. One has to write extremely well to be able to accomplish this task, which is not only personally revealing but educative. It reminds us that Freud's “Interpretation of Dreams,” among other things, was a brave and shared study of his own psyche.

In the following remarks about the book, for the sake of space, I regrettably need to pass on some materials that I admire or would love to discuss further. Everything in this book is interesting.

After Maurine Kelber Kelley's introduction, Ellen Toronto sets the stage as the first chapter in her ranging look at the history and mythology about women in patriarchal societies. She updates the thinking on old-fashioned gender polarization. Doris Silverman's chapter is a good choice to follow. It is a well written, scholarly and concise overview of feminism's role in these debates, and the history of the social and feminist shifts that influentially underlie psychoanalytic theory. Paradoxically, even as we have made societal advances, much lags behind, and now even goes backward in say, reproductive rights or equal pay. Richard Ruth then describes a new topic to me -- the

misogynism of gay men. There has been a shift from gay liberation to gay civil rights. The legal equal rights of gay marriage can clash with women's liberation in their celebration of being empowered by being single. The case presented is of a boy with two fathers who belittled him for being too 'feminine.' The therapist perceived this as a projection of these men's own fear of being seen as and denigrated for being 'feminine'. Ruth's original and courageous point is that a therapist may not be able to take a patient further than the mores of the surrounding culture, and that this is useful in thinking of why some patients terminate prematurely. It is creative to include an aspect of male struggle here too. Marilyn Metz bookends the section with rousing legal and social cultural details of this ongoing "war on women."

The second section on "women and sexual trauma," introduced by Kristin Davisson, expresses internalized and externalized appropriate angers especially, and describes in detail some exemplary situations. A chapter on "Date Rape and the Demon Lover Complex" by Susan Kavalier-Adler is clinical, highly dramatic, emotionally charged and so fast-paced and intense that I had a hard time trying to keep up with the torrent of conceptual explication of the patient's dramatic swings, her behaviors and her inner life in relation to the therapy along a described path to "repairing the mother connection and turning female submission around." Sherry vividly mourned preoedipal maternal failings -- especially problematic for a woman whose father was perceived as a sadistic "demon-lover." "Repair" to this bystander therapist would seem a monumental task. Kristin Davisson next shares beautiful qualitative data from her interesting research on the secondary effects of witnessing and absorbing one person's sexual trauma on another. Women supporting women are shown to identify and empathize readily with the victim, and to feel not only fear and rage on the others' behalf, but find their own long-term sense of safety in the world negatively impacted. These findings add another dimension to the (holocaust) trauma literature on "witnessing witnessing" (Trezise 2013). Katie Gentile then changes gear to consider institutions. She brings immense experience and thoughtfulness to her way of thinking about dealings about sexual harassment and assault within societies -- particularly within the university and psychoanalytic cultures. Rightly, she also differentiates them. She highlights the psychological limits of sharp legal divisions into victim or perpetrator. A more intersubjective psychoanalytic approach between doer and done-to, within the also culpable surrounding culture would be to intervene with guidelines of "restorative justice" that theoretically aims to keep all parties viable within that society. That described "resolution" -- in practice sounding like an ideal, emotionally intelligent even-handedness -- I imagine with an unwieldy group could prove just as complex as interventions using the sharper divisiveness. Gentile fully conveys that ambiguities can abound. Working at Yale University, I appreciate Gentile's points about the finally effective push for deserved attention that was affected by the more aggressive approach of the aggrieved women through the governmental involvement of Title IX. Nowadays -- I believe in a way she'd approve -- the SHARE Center, (Sexual Harassment Assault Response and Education Center at Yale begun in 2006) is not cordoned off as a "women's center issue" as she notes for other universities. It is a campus-wide place for help, staffed by the University, and directed by a senior female psychologist who happens also to be a faculty psychoanalyst from the Western New England Institute. The Center also does campus-wide outreach, and for incoming

freshmen, for example. They can counsel faculty and graduate student teachers who can consult, say, on staff-student dilemmas. The Center wants to be there to support the community. Gentile does not mention the misogynistic hang-over of the previously single sex colleges, or the fraternity culture that leaves a similar legacy – often now unconscious, but potentially the more hazardous for that. Sexually abusive issues also in our analytic training organizations can do with all the suggestions and help possible. I can imagine that Gentile’s work, well situated as she is in John Jay College of Criminal Justice, is creatively helpful to those in the trenches.

The third section on “women defining motherhood”, introduced by Ellen Toronto, is particularly interesting to me. I liked very much the arresting article on “Childfree women: Surviving the pushback and forming an identity in the internet era” by Adi Avivi. I was helped to think more about the impact of living childfree in this society. I learned the acronym “CF” and the term “pronatalist culture.” The reported research, full of individual voices, had an explicitly self-generated motive, which seemed to be for the author to research the contemporary environment, and look for like-minded women in an atmosphere of going against the grain. She discovered an enthusiastic response on the internet, and she used the available scholarship to think deeply about the lives before her. I cannot possibly do justice to the richness of the considerations, internal and external that she describes. Suffice to say that it is affirmation that the decision not to have a child is certainly not indicative of “immaturity”! The vocabulary shift wonderfully dramatizes the difference that language makes in the construction of our emotional comprehension of others. One subject conveyed it this way: “...I love and stress the FREE in childfree, for as I have learned in online forums, we are not “less” anything in our lives.”

The chapter on “A Perfect Birth: The Birth Rights Movement and the idealization of Birth” by Helena Vissing is equally fascinating. She leads too with her own interests as she became pregnant, but by contrast, where growing up in Denmark in socialized medicine, there had been no chasm between obstetrics and natural childbirth, as here. The ideologies therefore stand out for her. The Birth Rights Movement, begun in the 1970s, sees the quality of birthing as vital for a woman and her new baby, but approaches the event on behalf of women with religious fervor. Vissing explicates the politico-philosophical pendulum swings pro and contra feminism that affect childbirth attitudes, and offers that the lack of integrating negative aspects of birthing leads to the urgency of an idealization that is ultimately psychically suspect, and reproduces “the oppressing tendencies it sets out to fight” (p.175.) She fears that the authentic complexities of women’s subjectivity could thus get lost. This is a superbly thoughtful study of the vicissitudes of the idealization of the birthing process. A psychoanalytic author with an interest in childbirth is so rare, I note appreciatively. I do hope she keeps exploring this amazingly little touched area that I believe is quite erased from metatheory, and is vital to understanding much more than we currently do about sex and gender.

JoAnn Ponder, also working from personal motives, writes a beautiful chapter on the adoptive mother. She naturally weaves in the deep ambivalences – ‘under the best of circumstances, the adoption does not result in an instantaneous identity...[but] a gradual process of coming into being’. (p 185). Using a Heideggerian idea here, whether accidentally or on purpose, sets the tone for the article which is interested in the kind of process transformations of the psyche that interested Hans Loewald. She weaves in her own psychological narrative of she and her husband adopting a Chinese child. She speaks

of the searing loss of infertility, akin to bereavement, but different because it involves a child that never was. She speaks of the formation of bonding and the cross-cultural currents, She speaks of the birth mother and the psychological parents. "...[A]dopted child and adoptive parent both can become satisfactory replacements for the lost objects." (p. 199). Again, I cannot do justice to this well-researched article, replete also with a fine case example.

The final section on "Mother as therapist/therapist as mother" has two chapters introduced by Eileen Toronto who uses her own mother's story of a stillbirth, a miscarriage and two live births to show in her own analysis how she learned that she was a replacement child. What better learning for an analyst than this kind of powerful experience! And what greater understanding of Virginia Woolf's famous statement that we think back through our mothers, if we are women. (I need to acknowledge her too as inspiration for the title of this book from "A Room of One's Own"). Toronto also -- empathically for the upcoming account of an interrupted treatment -- uses her own impossible experience of her own patient who had suffered pained miscarriages being a neonatal nurse where Toronto gave birth successfully for the fourth time. Needless to say, that treatment floundered!

Meredith Darcy asks in her title: "Too Warm, too soft, too maternal: What is good enough?" It is a fitting beginning to the working out of Toronto's truism: "There is no doubt that a pregnant therapist complicates the treatment." (p. 207). I was immediately interested in this treatment that interrupted after 5 years due to Darcy's maternity leave. I think that Leon Hoffman now has statistics on the high frequency of occurrence of just that situation, and I have personally supervised two cases with this fate --where at least in one of them, I felt that absolutely everything that could be, had been done well. In Darcy's case, she describes how assaultive in manner was her patient from the beginning, and how she glossed this over because of similarities to her own family. There is detail offered here about their interaction and finally, in the therapist's pregnancy, the loss (for both) of various idealizations of all-accepting forms of mothering. Before the therapist's pregnancy this balance had seemed to work better with the middle aged patient indulgently viewing the therapist as "a baby," (she was so young), to the patient's final collapse into misery in her presence as a new mother, where the patient decided to leave Darcy, and continue work with the covering therapist. The losses were just too great to bear. The therapist reflected that she had become constrained and pseudo-maternal, and had not been free to confront her own gathering rage at this patient. Darcy says she never saw her again, after five years of more constructive experiences. Such is the breathtaking power of the thrall of maternal transference, now enacted in a pregnancy in the room. This paper is welcome as an addition to the existent literature on "the pregnant therapist."

In conclusion, I join Ellen Toronto in saying that she feels such hope for the younger generation's interest in this still underserved topic of female reproduction and sexuality. The papers here are so compelling that I hope more male as well as female psychoanalysts can become open to hearing these materials. I have elsewhere written of my great hope that we can shift psychoanalytic theory to include centrally, along with male sexuality, this interest in the female body and its sexed gender vitality. Toronto noted that she had never thought that a woman could have PTSD from a childbirth experience. Few have noted that fact, but that is likely to be far more common than we realize. I have been pleading in my writing that our field would take an interest in

childbirth in more patients than just for a pregnant woman in the office. Most of our adult woman patients have had babies in the past. Little girls (as well as boys) see these mothers and learn about their own bodies in interaction. The emphasis in this book I believe is the apt remedial one for our literature – the “radical” shift back to an interest in the adult woman’s bodily experience – akin to Freud’s own interest in female as well as male sexuality *before* 1908, when he began to go astray with girl development, and first began to insist on the centrality of the Oedipal myth. To support that tenet, he needed his own myth of the old one-sex theory, that the girl was “really” at heart a “little boy”! We see here the universality of that erroneous bias, far wider than Freud’s, but one that we can potentially use his tools to help.

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Relevant papers are: Balsam, R.H. (2017) Freud, The Birthing Body and Modern Life) J. A.Psa Assn. 65(1):61-90 ; Balsam, R.H.(2013) (Re)membering the female body in psychoanalysis: Childbirth J. A.Psa Assn.

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