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Triumphing Over the Body

Body Fantasies and Their Protective Functions

Pregnancy, birth, and motherhood exert tremendous pressure on all of a woman's boundaries: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social. In this article, I will discuss psychological boundary functions in relation to reproduction from psychoanalytic perspectives with a somatic focus. Reproductive functions pose special challenges for female boundary development. As the boundary transgressions of motherhood exert unique psychosomatic pressure, anxieties about loss and vulnerability are elicited, requiring the development of psychological defenses. I analyze two narratives in Western mainstream culture: The Supermodel Mother and Orgasmic Birth. The Supermodel Mother is untouched by the vulnerabilities connected to pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. This narrative is formed in mainstream media through preoccupation with celebrity pregnancy. Orgasmic Birth is cultivated in home birth movements, where the notion of a more truthful childbirth is elevated to an ecstatic and spiritual event of female self-realization. I will argue that these narratives are illusory solutions to the boundary challenge of reproduction and that they serve to protect against body anxieties through idealization. They are narratives namely about the body because they serve to protect against pre-verbal material from an unconscious relational realm that is not available for verbalization. The protective function of these fantasies lies in their contribution to a feeling of triumph over the body.

Female Boundary Development and Reproduction

This article is inspired by Gentile's study of the increase in images of pregnancy in mainstream media post 9/11 and the debate this study evoked. Gentile demonstrates a marked increase in media representation of pregnancy in her quantitative and qualitative analysis. She argues that the focus on pregnancy

can be understood as an attempt to instill faith in an uncanny and uncertain future, and discusses the implications of this form of temporal linking (Gentile). The study provoked several responses, one in which Zeavin points to the underlying unconscious dynamics at work in the fantasmatic narrative of *The Supermodel Mother*. Zeavin suggests that it provides us with a fantasied escape from the worrying aspects of what the female body is exposed to in childbirth (59). I wish to elaborate on this idea with a deeper examination of the bodily fantasies and their functions in the vicissitudes of female boundary development. My aim is to emphasize the importance of establishing the body as a central vehicle for expressions of intrapsychic and interpersonal meanings that are difficult, if not impossible, to verbalize.

Humans share the basic condition that we come into being through a female body. However obvious, this has profound psychological implications that are reflected in cultural narratives. Orbach, Furman, and Balsam are some of the few psychoanalysts who have written specifically on the interplay between female psychological development, the reproductive function of women, and the role of the female body. Their writings are based on the assumption that the female body and female psychological development are inseparable. They approach female development from a life cycle perspective in which body changes in the course of a woman's life are integral to an understanding of her emotional life. I will draw on these psychoanalytic writings with somatic focus to demonstrate their explanatory power in relation to anxieties and fantasies of reproduction.

Psychoanalytic and Somatic Perspectives

There is wide agreement in psychoanalytic literature, that pregnancy and motherhood will reactivate a woman's relational conflict history particularly with her own mother. From a psychoanalytic perspective with somatic focus, the bodily changes of motherhood will elicit the core of the first body ego experience. Balsam has elaborated on Freud's statement that "the ego is first and foremost a body ego" (26) by emphasizing that objects are then first and foremost bodily objects (Balsam). This somatic focus is her starting point for her theories on body pride and vulnerability and the tension between them as central themes in female development and reproduction in particular. In line with this, Orbach has contended that our perceptions of our bodies are outcomes of the intimate relationships we make with our surroundings, and consequently, the earliest relationship is key to understanding body image development (*Bodies*). She has paraphrased Winnicott's famous statement that there is no such thing as a baby, into "[t]here is no such thing as 'a body'". There is only a body as an outcome of relationship" ("Losing Bodies" 391). Because bodies only exist in relationships to other bodies, a female's relationship

with her body is an outcome of the intimate mother-child relationship in the enactments of cultural dictates vis-à-vis the body (ibid 393). The imprints of the mother's feelings about her body have a profound effect especially on the daughter (Orbach, *Bodies*). Orbach argues that this delicate dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship is facing particularly difficult challenges today because of the way the female body is being presented and reshaped by visual media culture ("Losing Bodies" 392).

Furman has described how a mother invests her child as a bodily part of herself which she must gradually release and transfer bodily ownership to (139). This delicate process requires flexible body boundaries. A woman's history of dynamics and conflicts from the psychosomatic relational matrix is inevitably stirred up in the transition to motherhood. As the boundary transgressions of motherhood exert unique psychosomatic pressure, deep anxiety is elicited, requiring the development of defenses. The physical experience of motherhood is potentially horrifying because of the tremendous pressure on boundaries. The maternal experience is imbued with anxiety as well as arousal evoked by the boundary transgression. This fluidity of boundaries holds powerful creative and destructive energy. It is no wonder that strong defenses are necessary when a woman is faced with the boundary pressure of motherhood. Addressing fantasies about reproduction must include addressing not only the intimate body-mind relationship, but also the specific meanings of the woman's bodily changes and their interplay with personal and cultural fantasies about her body.

The Supermodel Mother

There was a bathtub, and in this bathtub, in a mess of long expensive limbs and warm water, a baby. It was born. Giving birth, the supermodel mother muses as she lies back afterwards, her hair swaddled juicily in a scented moisturising masque, was not dissimilar to being backstage at a couture show.... You don't see what mothers are making such a big deal about—there was no pain, or fuss, or ugliness. It was basically Iyengar yoga with bath water and a bit of clotted blood. Beauty, you tell your assistant, as she turns over your meditation tape, is the ultimate anaesthetic. (Wiseman)

In this provocative description of a supermodel giving birth by Wiseman, we may be amused, but perhaps also disgusted by the eerie quality of the scene. The idea of the supermodel is an otherworldly being created in a fictional space between media, fashion culture, and our fantasies. However, she does reproduce, and it has generated increasing attention in visual media. "Bump

Watch” columns monitor the nooks and crannies of female celebrities’ bodies during all stages from pre-pregnancy, during, and after the birth. In light of current visual media culture, scrutiny of the female body is not remarkable in itself. The special focus on the maternal body and its changes is.

Gentile’s analysis points to a cultural splitting off of anxiety onto the female body. This idea is shared by Orbach, who argues that we are born into bodily instability today, which is causing a loss of the body and a preponderance of bodily insecurity. Gentile claims that pregnancy is the perfect vehicle and target for cultural anxiety because it can embody an ambivalent relationship to an unknown future. A fantasy of perfection is a strong antidote for helplessness and anxiety. The Supermodel Mother is a fantasy that serves to defy our dread for our mortality and vulnerability.

Zeavin agrees with Gentile’s analysis, but adds her focus on the underlying dynamics at work in the narrative of the Supermodel Mother. Real pregnancy transforms a woman’s body and identity in both terrifying and rewarding ways. The Supermodel Mother is above these bodily signs; she is untouched by the physical changes of childbirth, as if it never happened, which Zeavin argues is exactly the point. The Supermodel Mother is the perfect icon by which to represent the predicament of freezing time and dispensing past, present, and future. Zeavin concludes that “[t]he celebrity pregnancy marks the arrival of a new cultural family romance, one where the woman is all-capable” (60). This narrative of an über-woman as the ideal birther and mother offers important things to identify with.

Orgasmic Birth

Pascali-Bonaro’s documentary “Orgasmic Birth: The Best-Kept Secret” from 2008 presented a radically different approach to childbirth than that of mainstream obstetrics and was received with overwhelming interest. In 2010, a book based on the documentary was published (Davis and Pascali-Bonaro).

Orgasmic Birth must be understood in the context of the birth rights movement that began in the 1970s. It started as a wave of critique of the way the obstetric system in the U.S. and Western countries had developed in a medicalized direction (Clare Jones 100). Pioneers were Lamaze and Dick-Read who developed psychoprophylactic preparation methods for childbirth. A central person in the birth rights movement is midwife and activist Ina May Gaskin, who led the development of an independent midwifery model in a Tennessee commune called The Farm from 1971 and onwards. Her writings and advocacy have made a significant influence of the birth rights movement, including Orgasmic Birth.

Gaskin states in the movie:

It is possible to have an ecstatic birth—in fact, that is the best natural high that I know of. And these states of consciousness are best reached when a woman is fully aware and fully awake. Women don't have a way to know how their body works until they really try it out in birth. I think that women can be just completely surprised by the change in them from giving birth—you have something powerful in you—that fierce thing comes up—and I think babies need moms to have that fierceness—you feel like you can do anything and that's the feeling we want moms to have.

I do not wish to engage in a discussion about whether orgasmic births are possible or the rightness of different birth practices. My sole focus is to explore the underlying dynamics of the narrative of orgasmic birth. The idea of approaching birth as a liberating sexual event, rather than a strenuous task, is intriguing and compelling. In my view, Gaskin's description of birth has an epiphanic tone of the “true-ness” of birth. The idea of a special state of consciousness is spiritual: the idea of a revelation of one's body's capacities that will powerfully unfold. A higher purpose is alluded to with the mentioning of the fierceness the baby needs from the mother. The ideal birth is ecstatic, consciousness expansive, and revelatory, and all in the service of the baby. With this concept of the true nature of birth, it follows that there is also a true birther: a mother who is fully awake and open to her innate strength that she has been ignorant of, which she will embrace for her baby's sake.

Trust in the female body's capacities is without doubt crucial in childbirth. There is clearly great wisdom in the notion of a more sensual, sensitive, and loving attitude towards birth. Balsam identifies a scarcity in psychoanalytic literature of focus on body pride and vulnerabilities in relation to childbirth. She argues that “[o]nce we admit a closer connection between sex and procreation than is customary in contemporary analytic theory, we are confronted with a potentially universal human fascination with not only the sex act, but also with the underlying fantasies about the function of the female body in pregnancy and childbirth.” (97). In line of Balsam's argument, I believe attempts to integrate sexuality and passion in childbirth care should be recognized. I acknowledge the motivation for encouraging confidence and embracing the possible pleasure and pride of childbirth in *Orgasmic Birth*. However, I believe the cultural narratives that arise from *Orgasmic Birth* may result in the opposite, because terror and ambivalence is denied.

Zeavin provocatively proclaims her psychoanalytic stance:

No matter how thrilling the birth of a baby, no matter how much wanted, it is always in a sense traumatic. Giving birth inevitably

evokes our most primitive fears and fantasies: many women describe the fear of coming undone, of violence to the inside of their bodies, a fear of being unseemly and even grotesque. Pain itself is a source of fear as is the feeling of being out of control. The idea of a baby inside of one's own body, though easily romanticized and managed with an effusion of care, is scary to contemplate. (63)

Zeavin's stance may appear like the opposite extreme of Gaskin's statement, but her psychoanalytic approach offers a profound recognition of terror as part of life and namely the maternal experience that is not recognized in *Orgasmic Birth*. Balsam's idea that terror and vulnerability is closely related to body pride and satisfaction demonstrates the explosive potential of such an ambivalence-loaded realm as motherhood. The terror of birth appears to be denied in the concept of *Orgasmic Birth*. The idea that a completely wondrous, ecstatic, and fulfilling birth experience is not only possible, but the more "true" nature of the female body's capacities is the epiphanic message. Less ideal birth experiences are acknowledged, but are explained by the cold-hearted world of hospital obstetrics and lack of a caring and sensually attuning atmosphere for the mother. Birth in and of itself is orgasmic in nature, if only the true nature of birth is invited and accommodated for.

It is telling that *The Supermodel Mother* and *Orgasmic Birth* narratives confluence. Several celebrities have joined the home birth movement, some as central advocates, most notably talk show host Ricky Lake. In the documentary "More Business of Being Born", the sequel to Ricki Lake and Abby Epstein's landmark documentary "The Business of Being Born" from 2008, supermodels Gisele Bündchen, Christy Turlington-Burns, and Cindy Crawford give testimonial interviews about their empowering home births. In this way, choosing a home birth in the spirit of *Orgasmic Birth* offers an intimate community feeling with women of the elite. It is namely the air of elitism that I believe is expressive of the underlying dynamics of these narratives.

The Function of Fantasies

The fantasies of the *Supermodel Mother* and *Orgasmic Birth* offer the notion that motherhood without any boundary pressure is possible. The fantasy of *Orgasmic Birth* is an outcome not only free of problems or anxiety, but also victorious. Zeavin states that "[i]dealization helps us through nightmares—personal or societal" (61). The fantasies offer necessary protection as they help to create a sense of authority and cohesiveness through control over the body. Threats against boundaries and bodily integrity are warded off. The narratives address central pre-verbal conflict themes through the focus on the body and

its capacities. In light of Orbach's notion of the female body as one marked by anxiety in contemporary Western media culture, these fantasies seem quite appealing, especially for new generations of mothers who have grown up with mass media's visual scrutiny of the female body.

The pregnant body is intriguing for its visceral sexual and fertile meanings. But the moment after birth, the post-partum body is intimidating and imbued with shame. We desire to see everything, we are hovering over the bump, and yet we do not want to see the scary reality of the post-partum body. The idea of the post-partum body is the embodiment of the mother in her most raw and vulnerable state and therefore also our own most vulnerable state as newborns; quite a disturbing thought with all its triggers of pre-verbal somatically embedded conflict. It is no wonder we must keep it (or her) at bay. The media's harsh denigration of the post-partum body seems to be an effective defense that is part of the paradox: we scrutinize the pregnant supermodel, but we do not allow for her post-partum body. The only allowed outcome is the victorious post-baby body that shows no signs of ever having had the baby.

Triumphing Over the Body

The Supermodel Mother has triumphed over the maternal body. Her transition to motherhood is a victorious and orgasmic event. Afterwards, all physical signs are erased, but she can still reap the satisfaction of the power of the new maternal status. As Zeavin intelligently remarks, "[s]he can be the mother without embodying the terrifying aspects of the mother" (63), and I want to add: the terrifying aspects of the motherhood experience, namely maternal ambivalence and the physical terror of childbearing.

Balsam addresses competitiveness in relation to reproduction and particularly childbirth. She believes women's concerns and disappointments about their birthing capacities are about female-to-female rivalry about body power: "For women, their own birth experiences and deliveries go to the heart of their fierce competition with each other. On this platform, they either "win" or "lose" as females" (96). The intensive comparisons, mirroring and rivalry between mothers can also be understood as the longing for deeply needed reassurances that mothers need in their struggles with guilt, anxiety, and maternal ambivalence. In my view, both competitive impulses and needs for reassurance seem equally important in this drama of the female body and its capacities. I suggest that the competitive qualities of the triumphant body fantasies are closely related to the ambivalence of archaic longing for the mother combined with the hatred toward her, in her function as that first *bodily* love object. This ambivalence may propel a woman to create triumphant fantasies of her body and its capacities. The body is heavily used to symbolize and communicate emotional material,

especially in narratives like those presented. The female body is the intrinsic venue for expressions of pleasure and terror, pride and vulnerability. Fantasies about the female body and its reproductive capacities are particularly ripe for these themes.

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