

WOMB ENVY:  
Loss and Grief of the Maternal Body

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At puberty a normal boy has already acquired a conscious knowledge of the vagina but what he fears in women is something uncanny, unfamiliar, and mysterious.

—Karen Horney, *Dread of Women*

Freud (1919) in *The Uncanny* discusses the uncertain boundaries between living and inanimate bodies, the figure of the double, involuntary repetition, the occult, and womb phantasies. An uncanny effect is produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is blurred, when things that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appear before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes.<sup>1</sup> The womb as an uncanny Otherness, is a double—me and yet not me—within the self. We are attached to this double by an imagined umbilical cord where the death drive is at work through a lethal desire for fusion with the (m)other (Horney, 1923, p. 139). Using Kristeva's (1993) formulation, the womb as a form of "abjection" calls into question borders that threaten identity through the ambiguity and violence of rejection (negativity) from the (m)other's body (p. 219).<sup>2</sup>

As I was reading for this essay about womb envy, I reflected upon my own life and my own body, questioning how it was that I ended up with an empty womb. I asked myself: Was the political-legal system responsible for forcing me to have an illegal abortion in the mid-1960s, when I was twenty-four, possibly damaging my ability to reproduce? Was the man who got me pregnant responsible for not marrying me and keeping the fetus as I wished? Or was it my ambivalence regarding sharing mothering with men who were not that interested in family life, for whom

not having children was regrettable but not as deep a loss as it was for me? Was I too insecure financially and emotionally to keep and raise a child as a single mother? Or at a deeper level, was I struggling with sibling rivalry by envying my fertile older sisters? Was I trying to strike out by being different: the intellectual in the family? Was I scared of my own destructiveness, afraid of damaging my own creation? Finally, was my desire for experiencing homoerotic feelings through feminine *jouissance*<sup>3</sup> unacceptable? The power of the unconscious is such that we will never know what shaped my fears, desires, and acting-out through womb envy and pregnancy.

In this essay, using a sociopsychanalytic framework combined with personal reflections, I explore the idea of womb envy as reflecting unconscious processes of fears and desires for fusion and destructiveness within the framework of biological, psychic, and political spaces within modernity. Such spaces containing repressed bodily memories, unacceptable or unknowable feelings, call into question psychoanalytic models based on the use of binary gender categorization and an oedipal logic of separation from the (m)other. Sharing this personal exploration with colleagues and anonymous readers makes it political in the feminist sense of the word by creating webs of connectedness that sustain a shared awareness of the linkages—often unconscious—among personal experience, clinical thinking, and ethical responsibilities.

#### THE DANGEROUS WOMB

In antiquity the womb was defined as a dangerous place—in Greek mythology an angry dog lived there; in Christianity it was a place of sin where evil was located; since early Christianity it was considered a place of suffering (the travails of the womb); and in modernity it became a place of impurity, contagion, and danger (Douglas, 1980). Starting in the seventeenth century the travail of the womb became linked with “nerves” as a source of hysterical symptoms such as paralysis or speechlessness; later the desirous womb/uterus became the expression of brain dysfunction reflecting an excess of sexual desire, a wandering affect that moved through the female body in pursuit of sexual satisfaction. Two points are relevant to our discussion of womb envy: first,

the consistent and uniform visions of the womb as a menace to the social order, and, second, the feminization of hysterical symptoms as a result of modernity (Mitchell, 2000).<sup>4</sup> In these formulations, the womb, whether full with an angry dog or full of sexual desires, is like a wandering bodily affect that had to be controlled by social institutions and symbolic systems, disciplined through self-restraint (Foucault, 1982), and experienced as internalized fears and anxieties of castration, maternal power, and female eroticism (Kittay, 1998). In this paper I explore how these older formulations persist, appear in new guises, or are transformed in modernity.

The consistency of these historically negative views of the womb across time and space is striking. How these views of the womb have become reinscribed in the project of modernity and psychoanalytic thinking is a question explored in this paper. In traditional psychoanalytic theory, women have been described as wanting the penis/phallus and the power it symbolizes. However, much less has been said about men's desire for woman's power of pregnancy and childbirth and its effects on the psychic economy of men and women and society at large. Even less consideration has been given to a rethinking of subjectivity beyond the binary categorization of Self/Other, male and female. This paper opens up some of these issues.

#### WOMB ENVY AND VISUAL DOMINANCE IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis, as speculative fiction, provides a mode of theorizing about the dominance of phallic vision and the tyranny of the inner eye/I, what Luce Irigaray (1998) describes as "envy and jealousy of the eye-penis of the phallic gaze," that exposed the possibility of women as "nothing to see" (p. 76). This connection between seeing, wanting, and envy so clearly stated by Freud in his analysis of the infant's first hallucination of the mother's breast is an aggressive desire that gives priority to a visual capacity for imagination over other senses. For both Klein and Lacan envy/vision are linked to a paranoid gaze and to the need to control and dominate the (m)other. Teresa Brennan (2000) suggested that it is this capacity for visual hallucination that enables the subject to experience a situation where desire

and bodily action become split, where the focus is on the separateness from the Other rather than on the feelings of connectiveness to the (m)other. What matters is the visual appearance of "a thing" rather than the process through which it comes into being. Brennan (1993) further argues that the amazing visual power of hallucination is tied to a desire for omnipotence from the outset. This connection between objectifying and visualization was elaborated in Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of the "Panopticon"<sup>5</sup> that shows how visual mechanisms of control are at the core of a power/knowledge nexus in modernity. The visual culture of control becomes internalized and in turn shapes the way the body is looked at as well as how a mother looks at and contains her infant. For Brennan (1996) envy (one of the seven deadly sins) is not only about desire for possessing (m)other but also about rivalry and destruction of the source of life itself, including the environment (the mother earth), making modernity into a paranoid ego era par excellence.

Early psychoanalysts, especially women, questioned Freud's view of female gender development.<sup>6</sup> Women psychoanalysts of the 1930s understood Freud's views of penis envy as a defense against castration fears. His sexualized (hysterical) fear of the birth process and the dread of women led to a formulation of women as immature and childlike, an incomplete man, "un homme manqué" (Breuer & Freud, 1895). In his psychoanalytic framework, woman's desire becomes invisible, hidden in the mysterious processes residing inside her body. Freud's views of sexual differentiation, in which the phallus is seen as the master signifier of psychic development for boys and girls, were challenged by Karen Horney (1923) in *Feminine Psychology*, and by Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere in "Love, Guilt and Reparation" (1937) and Klein in *Envy and Gratitude* (1957). They provide an analysis of womb envy within which to understand the unconscious projection and inversion of the male gaze and fears of maternal power. The term "womb envy" was a shorthand formulation that refers to men's unconscious wishes regarding their fear and envy of women's capacity for pregnancy, motherhood, lactation, and attunement. Using Joan Riviere's (1937) formulation: "it is often not realized how much boys envy girls, and especially envy women (their mothers) for their breasts and milk, and

above all for the mysterious capacity women's bodies have of forming and creating babies out of food and what men give them" (pp. 31-32).

The fear of women's hidden powers and women's invisibility is captured in the oscillation between seeing/not seeing that is at the center of a visual technoscience culture and tele-technology that dominates modernity and shapes psychoanalytic thinking (Grosz, 1994, p. 136). Narcissus dies from looking at his image in the water; Oedipus puts his eyes out when he discovers his/story of murder and incest. Lacan's theory of the imaginary is based on a visual register around the impossible play of presence/absence. The Lacanian infant by looking in the mirror creates the illusion of wholeness and engages in a process of misrecognition. The "I" comes to exist through the gaze of the (m)other together with the entry into the symbolic order and the acquisition of language (part of a visual register) organized around the Law of the Father (Lacan, 1977). The Freudian and Lacanian models of sexual development are based on the assumptions of separation ("dechirement") and losses around a binary model of gender differentiation. Woman's sexuality is seen as an absence or a lack, a "hole in men's signifying economy" in Irigaray's formulation. The hole becomes defensively filled with the language of penis envy, creating a negative space in relation to the phallus that provides a paranoiac reassurance for castration anxiety (Irigaray, 1998, pp. 79-80). At a deeper level men's fears hide the unconscious wish to be a woman and the disturbing feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability that arise in young boys in relation to their powerful mothers (Horney, 1926). This hidden quality of the womb supports men's blindness and denial that in turn encourage their sexualized phantasies of capturing and controlling the womb. Comic books and Hollywood science fiction movies portraying the seductive horror journeys back to the womb illustrate such phantasies.<sup>7</sup>

Looking and wanting the penis/phallus and what it symbolizes, as part of the processes of separation from the (m)other, are at the root of recursive feelings of self-contempt and shame in women. Women when looked at, especially by strangers, often express a sense of embarrassment, shyness, and shame due to a feeling of being objectified and "looked into" in what is experi-

enced as sexually predatory, as several patients of mine reported. The feelings of shame and humiliation are not expressed verbally but experienced in body language (blushing and the lowering of the eyes) that exacerbates those very feelings through feedback systems such as being ashamed of one's shame (Tomkins, 1995). These feeling loops of humiliation-shame, combined with the desire and excitement of being looked at and potentially recognized as a subject of desire, create a toxic mix that is especially strong in my female patients. Lisa, who had been traumatized early in childhood, was made to feel that she did not exist, that she was invisible. She coped with the feeling of shame at not being seen, and thus being nobody, by creating a phantasm of the perfect daughter, mother, and patient. Having been invisible as a child she tried to become visible by destroying parts of her own self, hiding behind this ego-ideal. She believed that by conforming to that ego-ideal she would get the recognition that she desperately wanted. Her need to express herself and find out who she was stayed buried for a long time under the disguise of trying to be "good." The phantasy of perfection that the ego-ideal implies is another form of misrecognition, another distorting mirror of completeness and unity supported by a culture that glorifies images and creates illusions of wholesomeness and beauty.

The privileged position given to visualizing and visual phantasies in psychoanalytic theorizing has undermined access to corporeal signs and limited the understanding of body stimulation such as touch, sound, rhythm, smell, resonance, and vibration as they are inscribed in bodily memories characteristic of womb-like states of being (Eigen, 2001; Kristeva, 1993; Sedgwick, 2003). There are of course psychoanalysts who have tried to incorporate these nonphallic, emotional, and corporeal dimensions of unconscious relatedness that go beyond the visualization of self/other, like Bion (the maternal alpha function), Winnicott (attunement between mother and child), Kristeva (the Semiotic), Eigen (the psychotic core), and Gargiulo (mystical experiences). Yet the point of reference is still the mother-child dyad and the emergence of a unitary subject through losses and separations rather than a reconceptualization of the birth of the human subject away from self/other binaries within an oedipal logic. An

understanding of “differentiation-in co-emergence” (Ettinger, 2006; Pollock, 2004), part of a border state of life and nonlife found in prenatality and pregnancy, provides a conceptual space for exploring such ideas, to which we now turn.

#### WOMB ENVY AS PREOEDIPAL DESIRE

Early female psychoanalysts who challenged Freud’s ideas regarding penis envy and the primacy of visualization brought attention to sensory registers that go beyond visualization, with an emphasis on prelinguistic states of being, as previously mentioned. Freud conceptualized the desire for the womb as an expression of primary narcissism defined by the wish to be fully taken care of, protected from excessive desire, and provided with a psychic sense of safety outside of an oedipal logic (Freud, 1917).<sup>8</sup> In such a framework, the womb became a place where a return to a state of stasis anchored in biological experience with no split between subject and object was possible; a state where the distinction between auto-eroticism and narcissism was eradicated (Grunberger, 1971). Ferenczi (1938), in his article *Thalass: A Theory of Genitality*, argues that coitus reflects men’s desire to return to the mother’s womb, a state of bliss and security. For Otto Rank (1924), birth involves the traumatic separation—me/not me—from intrauterine ecstasy, followed by a lifelong desire to return to paradise and primal pleasure. For him the birth trauma becomes the basis of later anxieties and fears, greater than the oedipal drama. We all have experienced this intrauterine life and suffered the loss of this symbiotic state, but only women have a chance to revisit this condition through their own pregnancies. Men cope with this narcissistic wound by sharing in the experience of pregnancy and childbirth, as in the ritual of the “couvade,” by turning to mysticism in order to experience a womb-like “nirvana,” or by creating delusional paranoid phantasies of pregnancy, self birth, and parthogenesis, as Freud reported in his case studies of Little Hans and Dr. Schreber. These views of the womb express a melancholic attachment to an idealized wholeness and well-being (stases), a fundamental state of being that we all have known and yearn to return to.<sup>9</sup> Several of my patients view therapy as a phantasied return to the womb, a

space where preoedipal connections can be reexperienced. What they find in this womb/therapy space, however, far from being a nirvana, is an emotional space of interconnectedness where the undercurrents of castration fears and aggressive death wishes are mixed with maternal and feminine identificatory subjectivization.

Womb envy communicates powerful symbolic messages of preoedipal desires of incorporation and destruction. When the representation of the womb as a powerful cathected organ is internalized it may become persecutory, as the site of badness and destructive impulses. Melanie Klein and Riviere (1937) elaborated on this connection in great detail in their studies of infants' desires to possess and destroy the mother's breast and insides. In pregnancy this impulse is translated into unconscious fears of destroying one's own insides and the need to protect the "nurturing" from the "dangerous" parts of the self/(m)other relationship. Michael Eigen (1999) reports how a pregnant patient, Lucia, "feared that she was poisoning her baby, and less consciously, that her baby was poisoning her" (p. 47).

The fullness or emptiness of the erotic breast and the fullness and emptiness of the womb are highly cathected. The womb is never empty: It is full of delusions, desires, and perhaps also dreams. Janine, a patient of mine, was engaged in a complex emotional love/hate dance for years while trying to get pregnant. Once she was successful, through reproductive technology, she tried to control me aggressively by showing her power to (re)produce and phantasized about her ability to make me pregnant. After the birth of her child she experienced a strong narcissistic regression that took a paranoid turn. Janine wanted to be fully taken care of and feared being abandoned, while experiencing a state of terror at the thought that her child would be stolen by me, her therapist, and/or by other caretakers. Within that paranoid phantasy, her love and hate for me got split and frozen, leaving no psychic space for oscillations and reattunements, which led her to terminate the treatment. In some ways, the pregnancy and the birth of her child renewed closeness with a depressed mother and primal homosexual bonds that destroyed the life of the treatment. Such desires for the dismemberment of self/other continue throughout life, part of an oscil-

lation between the need to destroy and the need to repair, in a movement that brings together creative energies as well as the addiction to greed and envy.

A different understanding of the womb as a biological and psychic space stresses the vanishing of the distinction between subject and object, "good" breast and "bad" breast. The womb is conceptualized as a place where gender has yet to be crystallized, and auto-eroticism flourishes.<sup>10</sup> In such an intrauterine space bodily memories are separated from a masculine desire and absorbed in a "thetic moment" where the preverbal and the symbolic meet (Kristeva, 1984). For Kristeva the turning away from phallic language into poetic intuitions and art is a way to access the deep substratum of grief and sensuality where the experience of loss becomes soothing and self-repairing rather than pathological.

As depicted in films like *Remembrance* (Knudsen, 2006), intrauterine life is a floating, weightless space with physical sensations filtered and felt through the membrane of the mother's body. It is a space outside social time and without access to recall or representation of the past. Bracha Ettinger talks about such a space as having no absolute separation, and no full symbiotic assimilation/fusion, a space of co-encounters between unknown part-subjects. Such a conceptualization that goes beyond the use of binary formulations and a focus on splits and separations is a way of rethinking modernity and psychoanalytic theory. But first we need to understand the relationship between the project of modernity and womb envy.

#### WOMB ENVY AND THE PROJECT OF MODERNITY

Modernity, organized around the Enlightenment ideas of rational thinking, the contained ego, and the spread of visual technoscience has hardened the object-subject distinction and claimed an isolated, idealized, and domesticated view of the self that leaves little space for responsibility to the Other. The project of modernity, structured around paranoid projections of envy and narcissism, is based on the need to dominate outer and inner spaces and regulate the existence of virtual/future populations (Brennan, 2000). The womb, as a space of potentialities, is a site

for the production of bodies as well as being the contested terrain for magical effusions, scientific experimentation, and State power (Neumann, 1955).

Hidden behind the domestication of the womb is the dread of woman's vagina as a source of erotic pleasure (Groddeck, 1923; Jones, 1933). Reproductive technologies try to monitor sexualities by increasing control over women's bodies. The medicalization of the womb and the alliance of reproductive science with military technology are projects of modernity. In patriarchal societies the magical connection between sexuality and reproduction was regulated through rituals such as female circumcision (Bettelheim, 1962; Fromm, 1933; Mead, 1949). In modern societies the hidden connection between the vagina as a site of pleasure and the womb as a site of reproduction led to a redefinition of pregnancy as a "disease" to be treated by doctors in hospital settings.

With modern science, the womb becomes a place of less mystery, more visibility, and scientific treatment. Laser beams, ultrasound technology, DNA manipulation, and technoscientific visual culture have changed the womb from an obscure, silent, and magical place to a place of transparent scientific manipulation, as illustrated by Donna Haraway's (1991) fetus as a cyborg entity. The view of the womb as a crypt-like space has been replaced by a complex understanding of the linkages, sometimes deadly, between the mother and her fetus, whereby a struggle for nutrients is taking place, as shown in experiments of how the placenta aggressively sprouts blood vessels that invade its mother's tissues to extract nutrients (Zimmer, 2006).<sup>11</sup> Scientists such as Eric Kandel (2006) have demonstrated the molecular genetic steps by which memories are consolidated through genetic adaptation. In such a space what we are witnessing is a biogenetic intergenerational conflict and transmission of bodily memories with deep unconscious roots that go beyond the traditional unitary views of the fetus-mother's-body relations.

The use of modern technology, such as ultrasound and visualization of the fetus, has engendered feelings of forced connectedness and attachment to an "unborn child." These technological practices in hospitals and in doctors' offices are ways to "humanize" the fetus, leading to an unconscious emotional

attachment through the power of visualization, which makes abortion decisions more difficult (Liptak, 2006). Such medical practices supported by state laws and encouraged by cultural expectations regarding bonding between mother and child promote a conservative political agenda around "the culture of life" that actually diminishes women's choices regarding the outcome of their pregnancies (Sanger, 2006).

In political terms, womb envy can be translated as the government desire to control the future (re)production of selected human beings<sup>12</sup>—workers, soldiers, and so on. As Freud (1921) analyzed so well, the womb as a phantasized space has been used to mobilize narcissistic desire and transfer personal persecutory anxieties onto the social order (p. 188). Today, egg retrieval from the womb and the creation of sperm banks that objectify body parts provide marketable "futures" that inscribe male narcissism into a political and phallic economy of desire for immortality. The need to control maternal bodies and the acting-out of erotic desires are at work here. Before going further in our argument regarding womb and womb envy as a politicized site of control in modernity, we need to contrast Western developed nations, where the control of women's bodies is increasingly bureaucratic and ideologically controlled, to the world's poorest places, where life, especially infant life, cannot be taken for granted. In the later situation the politicization of the womb takes the form of violent, sexually charged and murderous attacks using the womb as a weapon against the most vulnerable segments of the population (*United Nations Report on Violence against Women*, 2006).

In technologically advanced and competitive economic systems like the United States, the pregnant/full womb is defined around issues of (re)productive rights (state control of pregnancy and women's bodies) that touch on the question of personal choice and rights of privacy. Despite women's gains in socioeconomic spheres over the last decades, the protection of reproductive rights and sexual choices for women have been challenged and are in danger of being lost.<sup>13</sup> State control over sexuality (enforcing hetero-normativity) and restriction of reproductive rights (abortion rights) have intensified, pushed by religious paranoid ideologies together with a capitalistic market-

driven search for ever more sophisticated technological advances in reproductive technologies. Such controls give greater advantages to the political elite of mostly upper-middle classes and rich men while endangering and sacrificing poorer populations.<sup>14</sup> Yet we are also witnessing an unconscious collective resistance to the social control of sexualities and the political manipulations of the womb. The womb can strike back and go on strike, so to speak. In many postindustrial societies like Italy, Ireland, the Soviet Union and Japan, fertility rates have been falling below the replacement level. While not denying the role of material and economic constraints in controlling family size, we could argue that we are witnessing forms of collective unconscious resistance.

In Japan, a country with one of the highest standards of living and lowest fertility rates, governments have been trying to encourage larger families without much success. Despite the centrality of the family in Japanese culture, women have kept their fertility down. We suggest that women in Japan are refusing to go along with a socioeconomic system that curtails their full-fledged participation in the economy, entraps them in domesticity, and make them part of a family work-wage system geared toward increasing companies' output and profitability at their expense (Silver, 2006). Using Kristeva's (1982) formulation, women, as the castrated (m)other, do not have equal access to the symbolic order around the Law of the Father. Women's ability to resist and defy the symbolic order comes from their position as "outsiders" from which they can more easily say "no." Their unconscious power comes from the subversion of the paternal order around their experience of preoedipal, narcissistic bodily experiences, maternal dependency, and corporeal pleasure with their children within the confines of an absent real father/husband in daily family life (Shibata, 2006).

In poor countries, in contrast, pregnant women and their fetuses are being starved, losing the battle for nutrients in order to fulfill the phantasy of control over a mythic ethnically pure "motherland," which functions at the expense of actual living mothers. In these countries the lack of basic resources, the limited access to medical equipment, and the political manipulation of sexualities (sex trade and the spread of AIDS) fulfill the financial, political, and erotic needs of a few at the expense of the

enslavement and exploitation of entire populations (Agamben, 2005; Žižek, 2002). What we are witnessing is the use of biopolitics to marginalize, bastardize, or destroy populations in the name of ethnic, racial, and national struggles for collective selfhood (Foucault, 1977). The paranoid delusions and collective acting-out involved in this process simultaneously create and destroy groups in an excess of "jouissance," an interlacing of sexual desire, surplus-enjoyment, domination, and destructiveness supported by the rational use of technoscience and military apparatus, as was the case in the Shoah. Bollas (1992) describes these forms of collective paranoia as fascistic states of mind: "What is this male maternity that Mussolini refers to? Is it not the death camps, where the living are brought to a container, stripped of their culture, their loved ones, their adult characters, and turned into bizarre fetuses eventually to be killed in this deadly womb?" (p. 205).

The control of the womb through violence and domination is happening today primarily in poor developing nations through mass rape, as a part of ethnic cleansing in South Africa, Bosnia, and the Sudan (Darfur) to name a few, where the unconscious interlacing of paranoid sexual desire and destructiveness has free play, making the womb a potent political weapon in the elusive and psychotic search for collective (tribal/national) identity. As the Darfur tragedy unravels, the womb, especially of young women, becomes a territory to be simultaneously conquered and destroyed, the place of genocide of future generations (Kertesz, 1992). The rape of women for political purposes or pleasurable consumption, as in the sex trade, engenders cycles of rage and shame that attack the soul of entire communities: "Shame as sickness of the soul leaves (*wo*)man naked, defeated, alienated and lacking in dignity" (Tomkins, in Sedgwick & Franks, eds., 1995, p. 148).<sup>15</sup> Shame terrorizes individuals and groups who can never escape the psychic scar of such a traumatic experience. Shame and the death wish are carried in the traumatized womb, whose fullness and visibility spread waves of terror and disgrace in nearby and distant lands.

Science fiction movies such as Spielberg's *Innerspace* provide a paranoiac, but not so unreal, vision of the attempt to control the inner space of family life through the life of the fetus. In

many science fiction movies, the male-mothering state (i.e., a political entity trying to remove women's bodies from dyadic attachments), as Patricia Clough (1992) calls it, represents an attempt to take over the functions of mothering by disregarding the maternal body, detaching the fetus from the mother's womb and putting it back, with the help of some technological wizardry, into the realm of an oedipal logic under the father's authority (pp. 90-92). In this science fiction paranoid male-mothering state, military technological developments are used to conquer the womb and save the endangered fetus floating in outer space. In this schema the hidden goal of the State is to enhance the marketability of father's authority in such a way that in domestic life the maternal body is made inconsequential.

Psychoanalytic theory has been shaped by and in turn contributes to the project of modernity as it deals with the conceptualizations of the maternal body and gender relations. In that sense it is not neutral. It is based on a vision of the bounded self organized around conflicts, splits, separations, dechirements, and loss as part of a symbolic order that leaves little room for ethical responsibility. At this point I want to link this theoretical exploration back to my personal her/story. The grief I experienced writing this essay went far beyond expressing an oedipal struggle. It touched a place where the boundaries of identification were dissolving with feelings of deep sadness and longing for my mother. This narcissistic regression brought back memories of our relationship. My mother and I had always been close, perhaps too close, and my attempts to get pregnant made us closer. At the time my mother was in her early eighties and I was in my early forties, my mother's age when I was born. I was angry at the system that had failed me, at the useless reproductive technologies that I had tried, at the men who had distanced themselves from me, and of course at my own angry persecutory fears. When I complained about not being able to conceive, my mother would take my hands in hers and say: "You have me! I am your baby." There was no judgment in her voice, no advice given, and no demands made of me. I did not understand then what these "magical" words meant. My initial reaction was to hear them as a request that I take care of her, as I would a baby, since her physical strength and vision were diminishing. Taking

care of my mother in her old age was my duty as a daughter, but I wondered how it was linked to my failed attempt at pregnancy.

Writing this paper I discovered the connection. My mother was not asking me to take care of her; she was enticing me to experience the deep connectedness of fusion and separation that motherhood can bring out. She was not demanding that I "do things" for her, but was offering me a field of emotional play that touched both of us. She was telling me: "Use me as an object of love." By offering her body to my care—touching, feeding, and changing her—she empathized with my suffering and my desire. The idea of mothering my mother, sharing a womb phantasy with her, was a powerful emotional experience. In a nonverbal way, we created a space where sounds (laughing and music), and physical contact became central to our communication. Her lullaby "I am your baby" allowed me to displace my concern from a physical maternal body with reproductive functions to a field of attachments to life forces where boundaries between two bodies became open and porous. Death and death wishes, of course, were already lurking in her and in me in ways that created an additional dimension to life by allowing deep empathy and compassion. At the time I did not understand and was afraid of her vision of a multiplicity and heterogeneity of emotional affects around caring for a (m)other. We were moving away from the concreteness of words to a shared experience of being. My resentment and irritation toward my womb's "failure," mistrust of the social system, anger at men/father, and fear of my own creative desires became gradually altered over many years of analysis by my ability to recognize and accept my mother's gift of empathy and the acquisition of a sense of alterity—that is, the acceptance of responsibility toward an Other as a part of an ethical subjectivity (Levinas, 1990), in a psychic space where the boundaries between personal/political, self/other, men/women dissolve enough to bring about a creative tension.

#### CONCLUSION

Going back to a creative process of/in/in-between/around the womb, I want to move away from the totalizing gaze of the phallus and the envy to possess visible or hidden things—the penis/

phallus or the womb—toward dreaming the womb as a life force detached from concrete bodies. I am not valorizing the womb, nor do I want to see womb envy as an opposite to penis envy. Rather, my emotional connection to womb envy and motherhood has shifted in writing this paper, from experiencing a split, facing a lack or a loss, to experiencing the in-between of ambiguity and heterogeneity of desire that looks at possibilities beyond binaries. I used prenatal and intrauterine life conditions as a conceptual model to understand a new paradigm about the coemergence of subjectivity as part-objects and part-subjects, following the work of Bracha Ettinger—a feminist psychoanalyst and artist—who points toward a reconceptualization of subjectivization around the idea of a matrixial stratum of a shared border space that complements the different meanings attached to the phallus. Using her own words:

The intrauterine feminine/prenatal encounter represents, and can serve as a model, for the *matrixial stratum of subjectivization* in which *partial subjects* composed of co-emerging *I(s)* and *non-I(s)* simultaneously inhabit a shared *borderspace*, discerning one another, yet in mutual ignorance, and sharing their *impure hybrid object a.*" (Ettinger, 1996, pp. 125–126).<sup>16</sup>

This essay is not the place to discuss in detail the challenging work of Bracha Ettinger; rather, I want to discuss the preceding quotation, which provides a view of subjectivity that goes beyond Freud's and Lacan's formulations without rejecting them. In her model she deconstructs the ideas of unity, wholeness, prehistory, and ego as separate processes. The matrixial stratum represented by the womb is described as a feminine originary dimension of the transsubjective unconscious web beyond the seeing phallus. There is a shift in focus from a visual metaphor of power relations to a coventing, coemerging and coaffecting of partial-selves in a process of "jointness-in-separation," along shared borderlines without a clear severance and separation of self/other. The particular modes of bonding that emerge from this prenatality reflect an "originary" feminine difference that evades the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. These conditions of cosubjectivity, which emerge in an intrauterine space, are a feminine diffraction found in both females and males—a weaving of affective and mental strings—that

challenges the view of the singular and discrete speaking subject. The coming into being of a speaking subject does not occur only through separations and cuts but through encounters between unknown partial-subjects at shared border spaces in the womb/matrix (Ettinger, 2006). In this model, the womb is not a container or a simple organ of reproduction but a space where subjectivity is shaped through coemergence. Such a shared cosubjectivity evolves through eroticized imprints and memory traces from the womb that continue over the life span in a crisscross echoing space of fusion and separation processes (Pollock, 2004).

This retheorization of subjectivity around an analysis of prenatal conditions has ethical and political implications. It adds to the Freudian view of projection as a defense against internal violence in terms of "us versus them," the Kleinian analysis of the split between the "good" and the "bad" breast, or the analyses of intersubjectivity between bounded subjects. The model of coemergence proposes a view of subjectification as a process of identification based on an "ethic of hospitality" where shared responsibility resonates in a compassionate alliance with Otherness (Ettinger, 2004). The process of coemergence, which continues throughout life between part-selves and part-(m)others, provides ambiguous, contradictory, and multiple paths to connectedness. It enhances the capacity for understanding and accepting Otherness, that is, the stranger, the uncanny double within oneself in ways that challenge the arbitrary binary divides between self/other, living/inanimate, human/nonhuman.

In the process of writing this essay my understanding and my feelings regarding womb envy and motherhood shifted away from a focus on visualization to a space of transsubjectivization and coemergence that decentered the oedipal logic. This shift involved the ability to move away from concrete representations, away from phantasies of wholeness, in search of nirvana, and away from the desire for mastery and domination of inner and outer spaces. Julia Kristeva (1982) captures this drift toward (dis)identification, heterogeneity and feminine diffraction underlying this way of thinking: "Obviously I *am* only *like* someone else: mimetic logic of the advent of the ego, objects, and signs. But when I *seek* (myself), *lose* (myself), or experience *jouissance*—then "I" is *heterogeneous*" (p. 10).<sup>17</sup>

I have missed contributing to the biological chain of life by giving birth, yet I feel connected through an affective web to all the wombs, full and empty, especially those that have been abused, destroyed, manipulated, or simply unrecognized. This dreaming womb carries and is carried by a multiplicity of desires. It represents an in-between space, a fold of energies and affectivities, a virtual womb where feminine desire resides, a breathing space of reattunement and creativity beyond phallic language and gender that gets expressed in aesthetic fields and especially in the psychoanalytic encounter.

The early psychoanalysts, especially women, understood the noxious interaction of envy, paranoid fears, and the desire for mastery and domination over supposedly castrated subjects and what they symbolize. We need to go beyond the project of modernity and take a leap of the imagination to recognize the mystery of the dreaming womb detached from concrete individuals and collective bodies. The oscillation of affects and energies that comes about with coemergence can crack open "inside/outside" categorizations, pushing bodily based subjectivities of womb envy into life-giving flows. Psychoanalytic and sociopolitical visions are starting to emerge that challenge attachments to a sense of a unitary selfhood, binary thinking, and territoriality. The speaking subject is positioned through eruptions along porous border spaces in a world of multiple and partial coencounters with Otherness that can sustain a sense of shared responsibility.

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#### NOTES

1. Freud (1919) in "The Uncanny" illustrates such a link between castration fears, the fear of losing one's sight, and the fear of one's father's death.

2. By "abjection" Kristeva (1982) refers in the *Powers of Horror* to the ambiguity and violence that "preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (p. 15).
3. Kristeva (1980) distinguishes in *Desire in Language* between two types of jouissance: the phallic jouissance and the feminine jouissance. Feminine jouissance refers to women's unspeakable and unknowable pleasure that exists beyond the phallus in the auto-erotic body through femininity and maternity (p. 296).
4. Juliett Mitchell's (2000) book *Mad Men and Medusa Reclaiming Hysteria* presents an analysis of why hysteria disappeared among men's diagnosis and became a feminine symptom.
5. The term was first introduced by Jeremy Bentham as part of prison reform in the nineteenth-century. It comes from "pan = all" and "optic = seeing." The system was based on a structure where the isolated prisoners were facing a central tower from which they were observed, never actually knowing if anyone was in the tower observing them. This system of control has spread to the whole society with new technological advances bringing about a "carceral" culture one in which controls become internalized.
6. Among the psychoanalysts who challenged Freud's view of sexuality and gender are Karen Horney, Joan Riviere, Susan Issacs, Melanie Klein, Paula Heimann, Josine Muller, Georg Groddeck, and Erich Fromm.
7. Japan's popular horror Manga comic books, such as those by Hinò Hideshi, Tsunoda Jiro, and Ushiro no Hyakutaro are examples of this vision.
8. In French, the word for pregnancy, *enceinte*, means a protective and circular fence/wall.
9. The idealization of life in the womb could be understood as a reaction, especially by males, to an increasingly competitive, cold, and materialistic modern world.
10. The fetus/infant sometimes comes out of the womb sucking its thumb/toe or holding its penis.
11. Sherwin Nuland explains how growth and plasticity of the synaptic connections allow for its genetic transmission (*New York Times Book Review*, April 9, 2006, p.14).
12. Such as the Nazis' attempt to create an Aryan master race.
13. The same processes take place in the ways social controls over sexuality operate against gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual, and imprisoned persons.
14. Carol Sanger, a lawyer at Columbia Law School, has shown how in the United States under the guise of protecting infants' lives through the passage of Infant Safe Haven Laws, a redefinition is taking place that links abortion with infanticide. The rhetoric used to control the womb was to strengthen the "culture of life" by drastically limiting and delegitimizing the choices open to pregnant women regarding the control of their bodies in ways that involved a complex interaction of family values, technology, and laws. Poor women are especially the target of such controls.
15. In this quotation I have used emphasis (*italics*) to show my addition to the original term "man."
16. Emphasis in the original text.
17. Emphasis in the original text.

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