

Book Review for Petra Bueskens (ed.) *Mothering & Psychoanalysis. Clinical, Sociological and Feminist Perspectives*

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Amanda de Clifford, PhD candidate, *University of Western Sydney*

Between the routines and rituals of mothering I seek out Petra Bueskens' collection of essays, reaching for its enigmatic cover that features a woman draped in newspaper text, bearing one breast, holding a glass of water in one hand and a leaf in the other, while birds flutter around her shoulders and pencils fire past her.[i] In *Mothering & Psychoanalysis* Bueskens collects twenty-three essays which together produce a lively dialogue about mothering from psychoanalytic, sociological and feminist perspectives. For Bueskens:

Defining, describing, elaborating, contesting and critiquing maternal subjectivity is what this volume is about and it uses psychoanalysis and, to a lesser extent, sociology (and social theory), as a road map to this destination. Along the way we consider the place of 'the mother' both as a therapist and in therapy, in art and culture, in theoretical and empirical research contexts and, finally, we look at the sociological critique of therapy culture encompassing the role that feminism, intimacy, care and mothering have played in the development of psychotherapy (2014, p. 51).

This collection is divided into five sections: "The Therapist as Mother", "The Mother in Therapy", "Mothers in Art and Culture", "Mothers in Theory and Practice", and "Mothering, Therapy Culture and the Social". Whilst the first section illuminates what Ilene Philipson has termed the "feminization of therapy", the middle sections draw on a range of cultural, artistic and theoretical contexts to further tease out ideas about maternal subjectivity within a psychoanalytic framework. The final section returns to "the social" and continues this text's investigation into the relationship between therapy and feminism and considers, moreover, what implications this relationship has on the dynamic between maternity, subjectivity and care (2014, p. 3).

Interested in the mother both inside and out of the clinic, this collection draws on an array of seasoned scholars such as Lisa Baraitser, Alison Stone, Lynne Layton and Eva Illouz, renowned psychoanalytic-based theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, but also emerging scholars and therapists working in the field. I will return to these writers and their chapters further in my review, and turn now to Bueskens' introduction which is striking in its length and depth and thus deserves a substantial exposition unto itself.

In her introduction, Bueskens demonstrates her formidable capacity for inspiring interdisciplinary dialogue for she not only sign-posts the key developments in psychoanalysis and maternal studies but also encourages us to be productive readers. She arms us with some of the salient questions we might ask as we move through this text: Who is this subject we name “mother”? How might we unpack some of the fantasies that surround the mother/child dyad-arising both in the psychic and social realms, and how might we move towards a more radical reconceptualisation of the maternal where “the mother” is constituted as “an agent of psychic and social change” (2014, p. 61). As Bueskens asks: “What is the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism and how does this impact our understanding of mothers? What does it look like – in theory and practice – to centre the mother’s subjectivity?” (2014, p. 4).

The introduction to *Motherhood & Psychoanalysis* focuses on the psychic/social dichotomy internal to feminist psychoanalytic theory. Bueskens uses this theoretical tension as a vehicle through which to trace the historical/critical developments in both feminist and psychoanalytic understandings of the maternal as she organises her introductory discussion into a series of productive sub-sections from the early work of Freud through the critique of the neo-Freudians, the developments of Klein and Winnicott and into feminist critiques and theoretical developments in both the second and third waves. These sub-sections tease out nuances of the psychic/social binary within feminist psychoanalytic theory investigating “the acquisition of gender identity, the nucleus of the neuroses, the position of the “the mother” and maternal subjectivity” (2014, p. 4) and, at every turn, Bueskens argues for a re-reading of this relationship as she writes: “for me, neither pole – psyche or social – can be isolated as entirely autonomous from the other” (2014, p. 20). Interested in the intersection between social and symbolic change, Bueskens argues that feminists are invested in both positions and must traverse the line of social construction (of gender and motherhood) and psychic universals.

As Bueskens explores, the challenges entailed in integrating psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious, of sexuality, with women’s everyday experience within a patriarchal structure are formidable. She argues that psychoanalytic feminism’s project is salvaging “what is revolutionary in both the conceptual and the political sense in psychoanalysis from what is reactionary and oppressive” (2014, p. 9). For Bueskens, the critical question in this project is: “What does a woman want?” And the answer, according to Bueskens, is a re-writing of “the script” in terms of traditional ideas of gender, “equality” and relationships:

What she wants, as I have written about elsewhere, is *a new sexual contract* that encompasses the centrality and importance of mothering from within an autonomous subjectivity (*Modern Mothers’ Dual Identities*)...What does a woman want? Arguably to know her (m)other in and through her child (or other creative project), which brings her to a new experience of self. (2014, pp. 50-51).

With this promise of a “new experience of self” the text highlights a reoccurring trait in this introduction that I find distracting, this shift between speaking about “the subject”, in one moment, and “the self” in another. Coming from a psychoanalytic background, this

constant shift in terminology is rather disconcerting and yet I understand that it reflects Bueskens' busy juggle between the sociological and the psychoanalytic – the social and the psychic. This quibble aside, while closing her theoretical overview Bueskens declares poetically: "I leave us here at the precipice of 2014 with a pram, a theorist, a mother and a baby toppling over the edge – falling into an unknown territory called maternal subjectivity" (2014, p.51). With this evocative image Bueskens not only entices her readers to enter the ambivalent terrain of maternal subjectivity but also highlights her affinity with Baraitser's persuasive reading of the accoutrements of mothering.

Although many of the essays in this collection resonate with me, for the purpose of this review, I shall highlight just two – Berkeley Kaite's "Fetish Operations in the Photographs of Sally Mann" (2014, pp. 281-297) and Baraitser's "Maternal Publics: Time, Relationality and the Public Sphere" (pp. 473-495). In "Fetish Operations", Kaite focuses on two of Mann's photos: "The Wet Bed" (1987) and "Popsicle Drips" (1985). Both these images not only raise ideas about the maternal gaze – her fetish and her desire – but as both photos involve fluids, they speak about a transgression or, as Kaite suggests, "a metaphoric seeping" (2014, p. 285). Contrary to conventional images of children in "Hallmark poses and Disney narratives", *Immediate Family* depicts wet beds, instinct bites and muddy bodies that need tending to. Central, then, to *this* maternal fetish is not only the allure of the childish form, but arguably a mother's desire to tend to her children.

In "Fetish Operations" Kaite draws upon Mann's *Immediate Family*, and the controversy surrounding this collection, to challenge the stubborn association between fetishism and masculine sexuality. Instead, she poses a series of questions about maternal desire and, indeed, maternal fetishism: What is this relationship between maternity, desire and fetishism and can we mobilise what we know about fetishism to re-read dominant understandings of the mother/child relationship? Drawing on an array of critical and theoretical sources, such as Jacques Lacan and Emily Apter, Kaite highlights E.L. McCallum's suggestion that within fetishism "the subject not only relates to the object but also believes – knows, even – that the object relates back" (2014, p. 290). Whilst teasing out McCallum's reminder that "fetishism is always about a relationship" (2014, p. 290), Kaite argues that fetishism, maternity and the photograph share a poetic tension between "presence and absence, plenitude and loss, desire and denial." (2014, p. 291). Thus, reading Mann's photos alongside a theory of maternal fetishism encourages, as Kaite argues:

... a more dialectical model of desire whereby rather than idealize childhood and the sanctified mother role (both doomed to failure) both can be seen as a temporary (not timeless!) investment in and performance of fantasized plenitude as well as the inevitable separation and loss... And what of the lawless indexicality of motherhood? Mothers may want their children to be their own – once and always their "issue"- but thinking through the fetish object/fetish subject relationship may help us embrace rather than fear the precariousness, ambiguity, anxiety – and eroticism – that attends to that seemingly most primal of relationships (pp. 291-3).

As Kaite “rescues” (2014, p. 282) the fetish from its masculine association, her essay offers a re-newed reading of Mann’s *Immediate Family* while deepening our engagement with theories of fetishism. Through a maternal lens, then, Kaite broadens our cultural understanding – much like Baraitser’s essay, which closes this collection. Baraitser opens “Maternal Publics” with a dramatic photo that shows the word “Mother” carved into a brick wall and follows with an anecdotal piece that describes how she discovered this cultural representation:

I took this image on my mobile phone in the East End of London, on a familiar “desire path” across an urban landscape between home and taking my kids to one of their endless afterschool activities... This was not a small job-not a passing act of graffiti with an aerosol. This would have needed tools, possibly noisy tools to cut these letters into the plaster of the remaining wall... The letters are over 2 metres high; the wall stretches for about 8 metres in length. It was a transitory intervention. I think of it as a scream: ‘MOTHER’ across the urban landscape, and a week later, it was gone... MOTHER, shouts the sign. ‘Yes’? I tentatively respond as I fumble for my phone (2014, pp. 474-86).

For Baraitser, this “maternal monument” knots together a collection of ideas about the maternal, the public and so too theories of psychoanalysis and temporality (2014, p. 478). As Baraitser seeks to “loosen this knot”, and unpack some of the relations between these terms, she argues that within the workings of late global capitalism, in both spatial and temporal terms, the maternal (theoretically) disappears while being simultaneously – and publicly – over-exposed. (2014, p. 485). Mobilising Stephen Wright’s notion of “time without qualities” and calling on a range of psychoanalytic-based theorists, such as Bracha Ettinger and Julia Kristeva, Baraitser teases out this contrary relation between the maternal and temporality. Within late capitalism, as Baraitser argues, the maternal occupies an “interval” between the mother’s postponed productivity and that of the child’s (imagined) future productivity. She argues that the carving of MOTHER creates “a temporary monument made from “wasteful labour”, what is made visible is the equally unproductive, tedious, monotonous and, let us say, deliciously unqualified time of the maternal.” (2014, pp. 485-89). This monument, as Baraitser suggests, represents a “breathing space” within the totally qualified time of late capitalism as it inserts “the private”.

Naming this public monument a “linguistic signifier”, Baraitser forms a series of shrewd questions as she asks:

... what is being marked or memorialized here? What memory and what forgetting is being gestured towards?... When the word MOTHER is arduously carved out in large letters in urban public space, to whom is this address made, and what kind of response is required? (2014, p. 486).

Through both a social and clinical lens, the sections in *Mothering and Psychoanalysis* build on one another to tease out a myriad of ideas about the maternal subject and the relationships between the social and the psychic in a range of debates about mothering. As these essays call back and forth to each other they illuminate some of the anxieties

and ambiguities that culminate around the maternal subject, while subverting tired ideas about the asceticism of maternal desire; they “give voice to ‘the mother’, ... identify[ing] a speaking position, a gaze, a fetish, a space, a time, an experience, a subjectivity” (Bueskens, 2014, p.62). Describing this collection as belonging not to a field, but to “an intersection of scholarly and clinical disciplines”, Bueskens explains that “the uniting thread [in the selection process] was the centrality of ‘the mother’ whether as therapist, patient, parent, paradigm, protagonist, research subject or shadow in the text.” (2014, pp. 2-3). In my reading, however, the mother is never a shadow in *this* text – she is a fully fleshed-out subject pushing a pram, following her “desire path” (Baraitser, 2014, p. 473).

[i] The cover features Matthew Cheyne’s image “The Pythia”. Available online at: <http://matthewcheyne.com/solo/2008–pantheon-of-karalee/>

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