



**Cortés Vieco, Francisco José. (2021). *Bearing Liminality, Laboring White Ink: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Women's Literature*. Oxford: Peter Lang. Pages: 280.  
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*Bearing Liminality, Laboring White Ink: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Women's Literature* by Francisco José Cortés Vieco addresses a specific gap in the scholarly discussions on women's writing: how narratives on gestation and motherhood have historically remained buried under residual notions of propriety and good taste. This topic has not been completely overlooked in academia, occupying a space within broader approaches to pregnancy (Adams, 1994; Hanson, 2015) or treated in isolated chapters addressing particular works, authors, or contexts (Berg, 2002; Coslett, 1994; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Marotte, 2008; O'Reilly & Caporale-Bizzini, 2009; Verhage, 2013, to cite some examples). While acknowledging this extensive corpus of previous studies, Francisco José Cortés Vieco instead examines the trajectory of the experience of motherhood in literature from a temporally and geographically all-encompassing perspective. In this sense, the work under review spans 19<sup>th</sup>- to 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature in the Anglo-American context. It successfully addresses centuries of silence and ostracism, aiming to recover these experiences of motherhood and vindicate the creative potential they can unleash in women.

This volume is structured into four chronologically-arranged chapters, each of which is subdivided into several sections. The introduction that precedes them, entitled "The

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Pregnant/Birthing Body and Mind of White Ink and Liminality”, takes readers on a historical journey across post-WWII feminist approaches to motherhood, from Simone de Beauvoir to Julia Kristeva. Cortés Vieco pays particular attention to Hélène Cixous’ conception of “Écriture Féminine”<sup>i</sup> as an empowering practice connected to bearing life, an approach that he uses as a theoretical backbone to sustain his work’s analytical core. The author then borrows the anthropological concept of “liminality”<sup>ii</sup>, a second tool of analysis which he employs to explore the threshold space where male “black ink” (which glorifies motherhood yet silences the physical and mental experience of childbearing) disintegrates, giving way to what Cixous defines as “white ink” narratives. This introduction illustrates one of the most enlightening contributions of the book: its application of consolidated theories to an unexplored niche of female literature with a barrier-breaking purpose.

The first chapter, “The Nineteenth-Century Threshold for Inkless Liminal Women”, consists of two subsections. The first one, “The Gothic Passage of Mother Medusa”, considers how Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë use white ink to inscribe their fear of procreation in *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), respectively. Cortés Vieco (2021, p. 37) innovatively reads the former as a therapeutic novel through which Shelley establishes a “silent sororal dialogue” with other women going through terror and trauma. Conversely, *Wuthering Heights* is understood as a cautionary tale in which Brontë expresses her “revulsion against monstrous pregnancy and motherhood” (2021, p. 47). The second half of this chapter, entitled “The Fall and Rise of Motherhood”, presents a comparative analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853) and Mary Ann Evans/George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859). Although the author contends that both works disagree on their portrait of fallen women, he concludes by pointing at the trace of white ink that makes them complementary. In short, inasmuch as they fluctuate between defending and condemning their transgressive protagonists, *Adam Bede* and *Ruth* are both deeply contradictory. This last reflection is what makes this heterogeneous chapter work as a cohesive whole: the contradictory nature of these four Victorian novels fertilized the soil where the seeds of groundbreaking female narratives were about to bloom.

The second chapter, “Modern(ist) Liminality for the (Pro)creative Body and Mind”, takes a leap from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain to the era of American Modernism. In the subsection “Rich or Poor: The Public Maternal Self in Edith Wharton and Meridel Le Sueur”, Cortés Vieco (2021, p. 87) deconstructs Wharton’s “discontinuous” vision of marriage through *Summer* (1917) and *Twilight Sleep* (1927). In the former, the author uses the scarce white ink at her disposal to celebrate the gestating body, whereas in the latter she paints a case of disempowered motherhood. Despite these differences, both works are ultimately united by a shared lack of sorority (Cortés Vieco, 2021, p. 77; p. 87). Conversely, Cortés Vieco points at the strong current of white ink flowing in Le Sueur’s *The Girl* (1939), in which pregnancy fosters female bonds in the most hostile of environments. In the subsection “Limens of Prenatal and Natal Traumas in Jean Rhys and Anaïs Nin”, Rhys’ *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good*

*Morning, Midnight* (1939), and “Learning to be a Mother” and “Vienne” (*The Left Bank and Other Stories*, 1927) are deconstructed in connection with Nin’s short story, “Birth” (*Under a Glass Bell*, 1944). Cortés Vieco explores how the authors’ traumatic experiences with pregnancy, abortion/miscarriage, postnatal death, or parenting intertwine with their fictional creations. In this sense, he contends that these texts may stand on the border between fiction and autobiography. Whether intentionally embracing these liminal experiences or suffering because of them, both Rhys and Nin deliver works where the spill of white ink is as overpowering as self-evident.

In its third chapter, “Toward a Contemporary Unity between Creativity and Procreativity”, the volume under review takes on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is done through looking at an ethnically and sexually diverse array of authors, all of whom find empowerment in otherness to “deliver free, white-inked liminal narratives about pregnancy and childbirth” (Cortés Vieco, 2021, p. 132). This ambitious analysis starts with “(Pro)creative Boundaries and Escape”, a subsection that revolves around two British writers’ defense of their procreativity from a social and medical perspective. Reconstructing the fallen woman narrative in *The Millstone* (1965), Margaret Drabble addresses the liminal journey from pregnancy to motherhood as a natural experience that enriches women’s personal and professional lives. In contrast, Elizabeth Baines’ *The Birth Machine* (1983) focuses on the imposition of abusive and invasive patriarchal power during delivery. Stepping away from the British white middle class, the next subsection, “Racialized Bodies of Liminal Reproduction”, revolves around Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston’s exercises in historical revisionism, or *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987), and *The Woman Warrior* (1976), respectively. Bearers of “hyphenated identities” themselves (e.g., African- and Asian-American), these authors employ their sympathetic white ink to rescue mothers from the grip of patriarchy and racism. This chapter’s last subsection, “The Negation of Sexual Reproduction”, contemplates a comparison between Ilona Karmel’s *An Estate of Memory* (1969) and Cherrie Moraga’s *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* (1997). While the first text narrates a story of sorority in a concentration camp, the second is Moraga’s autobiographical account of her journey to parenthood as a queer, Mexican woman. Although much separates these texts from one another, they share a usage of white ink to vindicate the right of ethnically and sexually diverse women to be incorporated into a wider literary tradition (Cortés Vieco, 2021, p. 215).

The fourth chapter, “Progression to (In)conclusion, Regression to Margaret Atwood”, opens with a recapitulation of the works deconstructed up to that point in connection to one another. This last section considers these regardless of the temporal barriers separating them and the order in which they are originally arranged. In being able to stand independently from the rest of the volume, this chapter serves a double purpose: it is useful not only for readers searching for a comprehensive summary of the arguments set out, but also for those interested in understanding the works as a whole rather than as separate case studies. Most importantly,

it is an audacious exercise on self-reflection through which Cortés Vieco revises his aims and displays his conclusions before dissecting the last novel. However, this choice of structure introduces an element of disorganization that hinders clarity, as the final remarks are left in a too-discreet position that does not reflect their importance. In addition to this, excluding the last novel from the final recapitulation may complicate its understanding in connection with the other texts.

Notwithstanding this shortcoming, this bold choice of structure could also be understood as an invitation for Cortés Vieco's approach to be further applied. After all, the author's introduction of his discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) after this unusually-located conclusion endows the work with a refreshing sense of open-endedness. As evidenced by Atwood's dystopian deconstruction of the topic of surrogacy, conflicts between feminism and maternity are far from being solved, as women's rights could still suffer from a regression under the constant threat of patriarchy (Cortés Vieco, 2021, p. 227). Despite this, *Bearing Liminality* ends on a mildly optimistic note: as the 21<sup>st</sup> century advances, Western women are in the process of acquiring increasing agency with regard to how they manage their sexual and reproductive choices. Cortés Vieco emphasizes that the advances and setbacks along this journey are being documented by female authors through white ink narratives. These not only rescue silenced voices and celebrate victories but also alert us to potential dangers.

All in all, *Bearing Liminality* offers a valuable and original contribution to the field of feminist literary studies. From a theoretical-methodological perspective, it displays an interesting balance between originality and rootedness, employing consolidated feminist and anthropological tools of analysis to explore an uncharted literary territory. By this same token, and thanks to its division into well-delimited chapters, this volume proves of service both for scholars in search of panoramic view and for those wishing to delve into specific texts or authors. Most importantly, despite the undeniable heterogeneity of its objects of study, the concepts of "liminality" and "white ink" are employed in a way that seamlessly delineates the connections between the works chosen. This way, no doubt is left as to what the connective thread is, ultimately, between authors as disparate as Shelley and Atwood. All in all, Cortés Vieco paves the way for these concepts to be seamlessly applied outside the boundaries of European and American literature and across all temporal barriers, opening countless possibilities for further research.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> As put forward by Cixous (1976, p. 875), this concept refers to the markedly female text through which women write about themselves and bring others to writing. According to this French critic, female writing practices are always supported by a positive motherly presence that nurtures the resulting creations with "white ink" (Cixous, 1976, p. 881).

<sup>ii</sup> First employed by ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in his 1908 work *Rites of Passage*, this concept refers to the threshold, transition stage between the separation of an individual from an earlier social/biological/religious condition and their incorporation into a new state, community, or role.

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