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POSITION PIECE

The Woman Who Helps

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This paper follows the work of the woman-who-helps, a figure who must be part of many French rural histories, but who I will talk about in the context of Yvonne Verdier's 1970 anthropological study of the town of Minot, in Burgundy. The woman-who-helps is talked about as being the person who 'does the births'. Her work is an expression of bodily tending to bodily needs, and her place, if it can be called that, is all over town. Her history, told to Verdier and her co-researchers, is an oral history, it is made of memories of memories, passed along stories and anecdote. In the context of Silvia Federici's 'house of the future', a house at the centre of collective life, the woman who helps is a radical and exemplary figure.

Introduction

Hannah Arendt writes about Ancient Greek conceptions of private and public space: 'A first meaning of the public: that which is real, that which is seen, which appears, which has publicity, that which is real to us because of this'. In the public scene, 'only what is considered to be relevant, worthy of being seen or heard, can be tolerated, so that the irrelevant is automatically a private matter'. A way to define private and public actions would be to talk about 'things that should be shown and things that should be hidden'.¹ For the Ancient Greeks things that should be hidden included all bodily tending to bodily needs. Arendt calls this work *labour*. The apparent irrelevance of this labour to the ancient philosophers and their followers was complicated. In spite of its irrelevance labour was necessary, not just to live, but also to be able to leave the space of the home and go out into the world, to take part in the higher human activities, of work (making things that will last) and action (doing deeds, speaking words that will have lasting effects). The space of the home and the laboring that took place there was just as necessary to a man as was his public, second realm of living. But achieving that second realm was the key to a well-lived life.

Silvia Federici suggests that 'if the house is the *oika* on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the house-workers and house-prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a centre of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of cooperation'.² Federici's house of the future is a public house ... a site where labouring might finally be given its due. It is a thrilling prospect, for as Arendt attests, 'no activity can become excellent if the world does not provide a space for its existence' (*HC*, 47–9). This essay will look to the past to think about ways of getting to that future.

Yvonne Verdier's 1970 anthropological study of the French town of Minot, in Burgundy, describes a community organised by the work of, and by beliefs about, women. A crucial figure is the woman-who-helps: *la femme-qui-aide*.³ She 'does the

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1958), p.40–67. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

² Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, (New York, P.M. Press: 2012), p.147.

³ Yvonne Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de parler: La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière*, (Paris, Gallimard: 1979), my translation. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

births'. Her work is very clearly an expression of bodily tending to bodily needs, and her place, if it can be called that, is all over town. If Arendt's chronology moves from Ancient Greece, with its clearly defined private and public realms, through the muddling of Christianity and the Middle Ages, where these definitions get lost, to the modern age, which she reads as the birth of the social, which supplants the possibility of publicness, then it is possible to read the woman-who-helps as a harbinger of sorts, 'a strange inbetween thing' – anachronistic in one sense (medieval, almost feudal) – but a trailblazer in others (moving between categories of space in such a way as to undermine and undo them).⁴

The history of the woman-who-helps, told to Verdier and her co-researchers, is an oral history, it is made of memories of memories, passed along stories and anecdote; it is full of holes.

Help

The spaces of birth in Minot's oral history are spaces of timeliness. It is important who gets there and when. The tragic birth is one that the doctor arrives at too late. The good birth is quick. Until the 1950s the space of birth is predominantly the double bed in the home. This might be the home of the pregnant woman or the home of her mother or another family member. If travelling she will aim to get there a month before the birth. As there has been no doctor resident in the town since 1879, the question is always, will he get there in time?

The midwife will come from one of the neighbouring counties. And the rich families will book her in advance. But the woman-who-helps lives in Minot. She is always on hand and always there in time. At the turn of the century 'childbirth was the affair of the midwife and the woman who helped. In principle, you didn't call the doctor, and if you did it was the midwife who decided, in the case of a laborious delivery and only when she felt helpless, in fact, when there was nothing left to do, almost always too late.' (*Fdd*, 92) Verdier points to the tragic straightjacket of the hierarchy of regulation and knowledge expressed by the three figures that attend

⁴ 'I'm a strange new kind of inbetween thing aren't I?', Antigone in *Antigonick*, Sophocles, trans. Anne Carson, (Newcastle, Bloodaxe: 2012).

birth: the doctor, the midwife, the woman-who-helps. It is expressed for Minot in the story of the young woman who gives birth to twins, but who with the second boy 'suffers'. The woman-who-helps at the time felt she could not do anything, the midwife too. Both women were immobilized not only by a lack of tools and training (midwives were not permitted to possess the tools of birth) but by the law, and by a hierarchy that enforced waiting. In this case the doctor arrived too late. The woman and her second child died.

By the 1950s, doctors travel by motorbikes instead of horses, and you could telephone for them instead of sending the town mayor on his horse. It was still not the doctor that was needed for the average birth in the town. First you called upon the women in your family, then the woman-who-helps, the midwife, and eventually your neighbours and the father of the child. Each had a part to play and each was present at a particular moment. Can birth at this time be said to have been *public*? It was certainly common knowledge. The talk about birth in the town is rapid and jovial, conspiratorial but open, each woman knows of her own, and can tell their stories, but they also know about their sister in law, their mother, their cousin and their aunt. Even the women who are feared or shunned because they did not give birth at home, or did not get help, have their stories told. In Arendt's definition this is publicity, birth is real and public – or real *because* it's public. What was its public character?

My sister in law had her five children here, the doctor never arrived on time, labour lasted an hour or more.

Up until the end, for my four, I looked after the cows, it was easy, I didn't suffer, they passed like a letter through a box. At five I was with the cows, at eight, they were here with me.

I was in the garden when I had my first pains, I said to my mother "must go". Two hours after the kid was here.

I didn't feel well, I made the bread first, warmed the oven, I baked, and then I went to bed. A half hour later the kid was here. (*Fdd*, 97)

Verdier characterizes the public character of birth in Minot as easy, without drama, and fitting into the rhythm of circumstance. Disavowals of drama continue in the younger women interviewed who emphasize the quotidian nature of the act, even if they are further away from the activities and objects of the home when it takes place.

I was calm, very calm, more calm than my husband could believe, it was hard, but I refused the anesthetic.

I gave birth in Dijon with anesthetic the first time, without the second time, I refused. Obviously it wasn't fun, but I wanted to see.

For the first, I feared nothing, I went to give birth in Dijon, without anesthetic. But I screamed a bit more the second time, I knew what it is.

What has shifted, from the 1950s on, is the register of what is shown and what is hidden and what must be made clear. In these later births there is a new need, to clarify your use – or rejection – of pain relief. This is accompanied by something that disappears – the women who attend births note the disappearance of *the shout*: a disappearance that can only be attested to by the woman-who-helps and the midwife, for only they have been there all along.

At that time, they shouted! Oh they shouted! I don't know why but women don't shout any more.

Me, I remember having a good shout. The midwife from Beneuvre, she said: Oh, I can hear in this shout that it's coming! I don't worry as soon as I hear that.

Until a woman says she's going to die, it will not come.

The old women would say you had to shout loud enough for the whole town to hear!

The woman who helps affirms that not everyone does it the same, 'there are some who have no pain, who give birth like that, and also others who suffer for a long time. There are those who cannot shout and there are even those who sleep.' But reflecting on the changes through her working life she says 'No one shouts any more. It no longer happens.' (*Fdd*, 97).

Of course, for those who do not take the anesthetic, the pain has not gone, but its public character has. And their relationship to that pain has shifted too. Has it become private? Intimate? Irrelevant? And can this muting be linked to the changes in the circumstances surrounding birth? Because what also shifts at this time is the presence in the room of 'a large and above all feminine audience'. (*Fdd*, 92) The intervention of the (male) doctor in the late 1950s sees the exclusion and removal of everyone in the room – apart from the woman-who-helps, and, increasingly, the husband. Childbirth becomes more strictly intimate – because for some reason the presence of the doctor and the woman who helps do not interrupt the tight circle of marriage that closes around it now.

This is why I have said the woman-who-helps is a trailblazer of sorts, someone who can come and stay, or come and go. She is not part of the public of common knowledge, the gossip, the anecdote, the story to be passed around, and is certainly not part of the family or the marriage – she is impervious and trustworthy in this way, a little like the doctor, who is feared for his skill, but she is very much of the town, one of them. She is anachronistic because she is not paid by the state (as the doctor and the midwife are) and is in fact not paid money at all but rather in favours. She receives kindnesses, gifts of good things from the store cupboard or the market, the use of cars, and other tools. She would never accept (and would be appalled at the suggestion of) payment.

I want to talk now about her work and how that too makes holes in the definitions of hidden and shown, private and public.

Toilette

She prepares the bed and once it arrives she prepares the child.

We put a mattress underneath and then above a good layer of newspaper, and then a sheet, a good proper sheet. We then took four old sheets, folded in four, wide enough to cover, and put two on top of each other, well positioned, well flattened. When the delivery was over, the first sheet was removed. The next day you do the same with the second, and you give another. It was well done.

Preparing the child is her true task, the one she does even if the doctor and the midwife are there, though when they are there they steal the first 'gestures of separation' (they cut and tie the cord). (*Fdd*, 98) 'The cord, I cut it, I folded it, I tied it with a double knot to three centimeters across. It takes a very resistant thread, very solid, a linen thread.'

As I translate Verdier's book from French to English, I come across a word like this thread, a resistant word. It does not seem to want to step over the line of language – I cannot quite make it work. The word that I struggle to carry across is a word that is essential to the work of the woman-who-helps, and a word that links her to her traditional ancestors. It is *toilette*. The woman who helps does the births. She makes the *toilette* of the newly born. She washes and dresses them, she cleans and makes ready, she prepares them: 'It is always me who washes. I warmed the water, held her ready, and gave her her bath in the large tub. I scrubbed then I dressed – you wrap the belly with a strip of cloth – it holds the organs – and then they swaddled them'. I settle for the verb prepare – 'put beforehand into a suitable condition for some action, bring into a proper state for use, get or make ready, fit out, equip'.⁵ But it loses some of the gestures of washing. It seems right to emphasize that the baby is being made ready *for* something, but the woman-who-helps would want to make clear that her work is one gesture – one gesture to wash, clothe and prepare.

This gesture, this readying, is repeated at the point of the woman-who-helps' other service, that of doing the deaths.

⁵ Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

For the well arranged death, the woman who helps gives herself to a mortuary household: closes the windows, closes the shutters, covers the mirror with a piece of linen – white according to some, black according to others – otherwise it would reflect eternally, the face of the dead. Today we also veil television screens, a surface that evokes the mirror, captures, carries, leads to distant worlds? Or even an indiscreet look? All these gestures attest to a concern for closure and tend to forbid passage to the outside, nothing should come out of the dead man's room. (*Fdd*, 100–103)

The woman who helps stops the clocks, prepares the death chamber, lights candles because electric light cannot be used.

The body remains like this for three days. In the daytime, neighbours pass by, sprinkling the dead with holy water, those who wish to see him for the last time raise the handkerchief. At night, the woman who helps organises the watch. At midnight she makes coffee. (*Fdd*, 103)

The same woman makes a set series of gestures at birth and at death. She stands in for the family who do not know how or who are afraid. Verdier points out that in Minot, there is the same fear at both moments. 'In front of the new born as in front of the dead, the same panic seizes them.' Today, her interviewees say, things have changed, it is all over in a night, and strangers and neighbours do not come anymore. 'The public of death has narrowed down in recent years to its simplest and most symbolic expression, the woman who helps.'

Verdier likens her work to that of her ancestors in trade, the washerwomen. They too make ready and prepare, they too cross from private to public places, and do what others cannot do. In Minot these women would arrive at certain points in the year, and the great wash would be the occasion where 'the year, with the laundry, would get its annual clean'.⁶ The woman is prized in the town for her services, and

⁶ Mary Douglas, 'Woman, the measure of all things, reviewing Yvonne Verdier *Façons de Dire, Façons de Faire*', *Anthropology Today* 3, (Oct 1987) pp.2–4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3032885>.

for the qualities that mean she can practice them, the ability to pass between, to be admitted, and to grant admittance. She makes ready and good (makes socially acceptable and bearable) the unready bodies of the newborn and of the dead. She makes symmetrical and reverse gestures: 'that the newborn be cleansed of the impurities he brings from the beyond, that the dead does not take any with him'.

The woman who helps is neither public nor private, because she does not seem to respect the differences between these states or these spaces. She *helps* by her imperviousness to such definitions, she crosses and helps others to cross. She is a social character, plays a social role, inviting, making safe, making ready, letting in or out, but her sociability is ensured by a breaking of the rules rather than by their observance. Her work is to include the bodily tending to the body in the wider social and symbolic life of the town. The fact that the same figure attends both moments (and that both moments are tethered to the bed) seems to speak of a clear link between these two thresholds, the start and the end of life. The fact that at these moments necessary and visible work takes place dilutes the distinction between what can be shown and what should be hidden, while her status dilutes the old distinction between higher and lower forms of human action. She is a character who helps make the house and its labour public.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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