

**Owens, Kim Hensley. *Writing Childbirth: Women's Rhetorical Agency in Labor and Online*. Southern Illinois UP, 2015. 272 pages.**

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Recently I viewed several episodes of a feminist sketch comedy web series, "Expecting," that satirizes pregnancy as an experience shaped by social norms and the desires of contemporary mothers-to-be. In one episode, the pregnant protagonist, Mikala, lounges on a chaise and lists her plans for labor and delivery (these include a "birth kimono," four hours of labor that is like "a hard yoga class," and eating her placenta). Mikala's birth plan is spliced with what we can assume is footage of real women (i.e., non-actors) who have given birth, each of whom describes birthing experiences such as days-long labor, indescribable pain, and the fear that this is "all going to end up horribly" (Riot, "Will I"). The juxtaposition of the clips makes the sketch humorous (and eye-opening for those not intimately familiar with childbirth); Mikala's wishes are rendered indulgent, wholly unrealistic, and thus laughable. In another episode, Mikala walks to a corner store with a friend as the two discuss her pregnancy. The chat is banal until a stranger hears the conversation, approaches the two women, and insists, "Do not waste your money on pregnancy jeans!" (Riot, "Everyone's"). Another stranger approaches and, unsolicited, counters this advice. One by one, a crowd gathers, each stranger plying Mikala with directives as to what she should or should not do as an expectant mother, each directive becoming more intrusive and absurd than the last. As both sketches suggest, Mikala is a comic character because of the wild discrepancy between her perceived and actual agency while "expecting." For in this early part of the twenty-first century, as women experience gender-based gains as well as the persistence of intersectional hierarchies of power, pregnancy and childbirth remain key sites of women's diminished agency. Or, in simpler terms, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

As suggested by its title, *Writing Childbirth: Women's Rhetorical Agency in Labor and Online*, Kim Hensley Owens's monograph cuts to the heart of this vexing topic of pregnant women's agency. A recent contribution to the

Southern Illinois University Press's Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms series, the text applies an academic exploration to the same sorts of discomforts and frustrations raised in the "Expecting" comedy series. Owens's book has much to offer readers through its focused analysis of two genres of childbirth writing (the birth plan and the birth narrative), historical overviews that contextualize contemporary practices and perceptions of childbirth, and a range of theoretical contributions that promise to inform but also extend beyond childbirth-related literacy activities.

Not the least of these contributions is Owens's exploration of rhetorical agency as a still-undertheorized concept. Owens argues that those wishing to recognize "feminist rhetorical agency" must not measure such agency through women's successes, nor should they focus on agency's manifestation "at a particular moment frozen in time" (10). Her analysis of childbirth writing explicates these claims and leads to her contention that feminist rhetorical agency can be recognized as "a series of disparate, collective assertions over time and space" (138). Feminist rhetorical agency can likewise exist even when rhetorical goals have been "thwarted" (137). And as will prove central to Owens's analysis, rather than only producing specific effects, such agency can do the subtle yet significant work of enabling rhetors to shape "events for their own and others' understanding and reassessment" (10). Specifically, this project illustrates how pregnant and birthing women's rhetorical agency in writing childbirth genres brings understanding to and invites reassessment of giving birth, a process that is simultaneously biological and constructed through human rhetorical action and motivations. These exciting interventions into the dynamism of rhetorical agency share synergies with those of Sarah Hallenbeck, whose recent scholarship reworks the notion of agency to be recognizable beyond (only) the individual rhetor, maps agency's distributed forms, and identifies the "rhetorical effort" that "both emerge[s] from and reverberate[s] within" networks of activity (xviii). Owens's project, then, not only offers insights into genres of childbirth writing but extends rich current discussions of rhetorical agency and the methods (here rhetorical and qualitative) for tracing this increasingly complicated but crucial concept.

Owens situates her work not only within feminist rhetorical conversations but also among examinations of "rhetorics of the everyday" and "rhetorics of health and medicine" (14). Her introduction explores the unique convergence of these areas of inquiry and acknowledges that the "rhetorical power and agency" that birthing women experience is shaped by the "rhetorical context of childbirth" as well as how this power and agency functions online and in non-digital environments. It might be helpful to note that although Owens's project examines a number of digital texts and "focuses on the Internet" (9), she does not primarily investigate rhetorical delivery in online spaces, but

rather a range of on- and off-line rhetorical experiences of pregnant and birthing women. Many of these experiences are as enabled and/or constrained by physical place (e.g., hospital or home in the case of a home birth) as much as by digital spaces and the affordances of an earlier Internet age. Said another way, although the texts analyzed in this book were largely made possible by women's access to information shared online, Owens's theoretical contributions are not concentrated around digital literacies. Her insights are likely to animate conversations well beyond those related to the "labor" and "online" rhetorics suggested by her title.

In her first body chapter, "Understanding Birth: Commonplaces of Modern American Childbirth Advice," Owens pens a deft summary of the history of giving birth in the United States since colonial times. This overview enables Owens to lay familiar medical progress narratives (e.g., that specialized knowledge and professional oversight of pregnant and birthing women is beneficial to their wellbeing and thus an ever-developing "good") alongside narratives of decline (e.g., expressions of an allegedly unfavorable shift from birthing as a women-centered practice to one managed by male physicians using new technologies). This compressed survey reveals how such narratives are steeped in praise and blame. Owens complicates trajectories of progress and decline by acknowledging that women themselves historically advocated for some of the medical interventions that have been construed as limiting birthing women's agency. She counters misinformation about the supposed danger of birthing and identifies the role that "support" (e.g., technologies and human attendants) has played in bolstering the perceived need for biomedical interventions during pregnancy. Having carefully laid out this history of birthing as a social, medical, and technological context for contemporary practices, Owens returns to her focus on agency, arguing that women have become "sites, or objects, of childbirth, while physicians and technologies [have become] childbirth's agents" (34). The insight prepares readers for her subsequent explanation of childbirth writing through birth plans and birth narratives that, Owens argues, disrupts this agential control.

The next two chapters of the book investigate the online birth plan as an unusually complex genre that simultaneously enables and in some ways denies birth plan writers' agency. In "Inventing Birth: Rhetorics of Control and Resistance," Owens presents the birth plan as a "rare instance of patient-to-doctor written communication" (42) in which everyday women write "as consumers," indicating their wishes during labor and delivery in order to resist an otherwise passive role in medicalized and intervention-heavy approaches (44). Connecting this chapter to the previous one on birthing history, Owens argues that US women have lost a significant amount of control over childbirth as the process moved from the home to the hospital in the

first half of the twentieth century. This spatial shift aligns with an increased reliance on specialized/medical knowledge instead of women's experiential knowledge of the birthing process. Analyzing online birth plan templates and survey results from women who wrote a plan, Owens finds that many plans seek to bring "home-birth norms" to hospital births, a "rhetorical challenge" that frequently leads to "mixed results" (43). Owens's keen analysis situates these mixed results in relation to several sites of "control" that the birth plan writer cannot easily change. Namely, these sites include the space of the hospital; the *chronos*-oriented assumptions of medicalized norms that devalue a *kairic* approach to the process of birthing; the lack of control that can be exerted over the birthing body (which can result in plans being dismissed by physicians and attendants who revert to medical and legal standards); and the heuristic function of online birth plan templates that, in suggesting content and conventions, circumscribe writers' inventional possibilities. Making a compelling argument that the birth plan genre reflects societal assumptions about birth as much as the will of their authors, Owens claims that such plans "represent a technological and ideological confrontation of wills, the wills of birthing women, dominant culture, and medical staff" (65). Because of this conflation of wills, women's assertions of rhetorical agency do not necessarily translate into "material power" (66) during childbirth; more simply, their hopes and assertions do not necessarily change the material conditions of birthing even though the point of a birth plan is to do just that. Despite the fact that at times plans simply are not respected and/or implemented (particularly in the hospital setting), Owens cedes that the self-directed education involved in developing a plan amid conflicting and abundant information could serve a rhetorical value that exceeds a plan's implementation.

Chapter three, "Confronting Birth: Rhetorical Disability and Five Women's Birth Plans," extends and amplifies the claims made in the previous chapter. Owens analyzes an "archive" (71) of five birth plans obtained from survey respondents, triangulating these plans with plan templates and participant responses. Through close analysis of the aspects of birth plans that she deems to "serve a rhetorical function" (74), Owens maps the discursive characteristics of plans (e.g., style, ethical appeals, strategic uses of politeness) that simultaneously bolster and limit plan writers' rhetorical agency. It was when reading this portion of the book in which Owens explains the "medical, legal, and narrative" convergences present in birth plans and their flagrant dismissal by some medical professionals that I realized just how complex, strange, and rhetorically intriguing the genre is. I value Owens's contemplation of how writing functions as a technique that can expose and undermine, if not directly overturn, the embodied performances of medicalized birth (such as laying on one's back while birthing) that literally render women passive. Birth plan writers,

Owens contends, both anticipate and “confront” (84) their own “rhetorical disability” during childbirth, or their expected inability to communicate due to pain, being medicated, and/or power differentials in the delivery room. Thus birth plan writing is meant to “stand in for” a voice that may be silent during childbirth. Charting textual features of the plans illustrates the rhetorical negotiation that writers undertake in anticipation of the power differentials and contextual factors contributing to this rhetorical disability. The chapter compellingly argues for the educational value of birth plan writing as a “research and writing exercise” and makes a case for recognizing the indirect empowerment such writing can afford. Women “embody the philosophy of writing to learn” (86) as they proactively educate themselves about birthing options and communicate their preferences to others.

Shifting from birth plans to birth stories, Owens next takes readers to a genre that women compose after giving birth. “Hosting Birth: Birth and Birth Stories over Time and Online” investigates five Web 1.0 “childbirth and parenting” sites that have posted women’s narratives about their birthing experiences. Owens analyzes the content (alphabetic and visual) and commercial features of these sites, some of which are corporate and some non-corporate. Owens frames this form of writing childbirth as the “online descendants” (94) of traditional, often oral, birth stories. She advocates viewing this form of writing as remediation because it enables women to make private experiences public and thus potentially remedy contemporary women’s lack of knowledge and experience in relation to childbirth (95). Arguing that these host sites enable the possibility for women to connect, interact, and create a “virtual coterie” (97), Owens also demonstrates how the sites constrict this rhetorical potential. She focuses on the presence of advertisements, the inclusion (or exclusion) of visual images including photographs of birthing women, the hosts’ methods for categorizing and labeling stories, and their invitations for submissions, all of which constrain contributors. She further uses these observations to suggest that women writers have been hailed as “procreative customers” (107) who, in some cases, are likely prompted to write in ways that will increase consumer traffic on commercial sites. As with earlier chapters, Owens extends her theory of feminist rhetorical agency, here focusing on how websites “invite and use” women’s birth stories and, subsequently how agency can be “distribut[ed]” (90) in online environments. Through her close-textual analysis, Owens presents a fair assessment of how these sites extend a promise of distributed agency that they ultimately fail to uphold.

“Th[e] complexity [of birth narratives] mirrors the complexity of birth itself as a profound physical, psychological, social, and often medical event” (125). This claim illustrates the insights Owens provides throughout her text and especially in the last body chapter, “Sharing Birth: Catharsis, Commentary, and

Testimonial in Online Birth Stories.” In this second chapter examining birth narratives and survey responses, Owens argues that birth narrative authors “write [themselves] into a rhetorical stance” (130) that enables them to thereby “write themselves into the role of mother” (136). In so doing, these women construct a “received truth” (132) that may differ from reality but nevertheless enables them to remediate their experiences and create restorative and empowering memories. Specifically, the birth narrative writing that Owens investigates suggests that women use storytelling to “come to terms” (130) with varied experiences including (often traumatic) births and challenging hospital encounters. Birth stories hold a range of rhetorical functions, Owens demonstrates; they function as public writing that educates other women, as a site for personal catharsis, as testimonials inviting exchange, as a mash-up of “advice column” and “consciousness-raising tract” (120), and—above all—as “disruptive” writing that can unsettle and reframe both personal experiences and public expectations of childbirth. Owens’s explication of writing as a “method of remembering” (131) and narrative as “sociopolitical expression” (115) are two of the most generative aspects of this intriguing chapter.

I found Owens’s epilogue the most surprising and thought-provoking portion of the entire text. I admit that I anticipated Owens retelling her own birth story in order to state her positionality, to better align herself with self-disclosing study participants, and to bolster the claims made in earlier chapters. The first half of the epilogue, however, is unexpected in that it theorizes the concept of “experience” based on the shifting critiques Owens received as a researcher on childbirth writing before, and then after, she experienced childbirth herself. She casts experience as most usefully understood in divergent ways, as a “legitimate” source of *ethos* and/or as a constructed rhetorical space that enables or constrains a rhetor (140). I admit that my expectations for this autoethnographic chapter reflect my own deficits in thinking about the rhetorical complexity of experience which, itself, is “so amorphous a concept” (145). Lacing this rewardingly conceptual material with ideas presented earlier in the book (e.g., memory and narrative), Owens illuminates the value of embodied experience for scholars working on body-related topics. Ultimately, though, she advocates for sound scholarly training and research methods to be the most significant basis for evaluating one’s *ethos* on any topic, even those related to our intimate and bodily ways of knowing. Owens concludes the book with her personal birth stories; these narratives were so engrossing and elegantly written that, upon taking a pause, I realized I had stopped annotating the final pages of the text. As a coda to the project, the narratives are anything but self-serving or superfluous; Owens uses them to ponder how her scholarly and embodied selves have merged across time, space, and experience and how she remembers them through her writing.

*Writing Childbirth* promises to contribute much to the study of feminist rhetorics. I found myself grappling throughout the book with some fundamental paradoxes of the social and rhetorical constructions of childbirth (at least in the US) that necessitate the kind of unpacking, articulating, and explicating that Owens performs. For instance, while reading the book I began asking stasis-like questions about childbirth writing and its animation of the differing ideologies of stakeholders (i.e., women, partners, and medical professionals), all of whom arguably want the best for both mothers and children. Consider rhetorical agency, for example: Owens has taught me that the control a birth plan writer seeks is already potentially in conflict with the limited control a woman can exert over her birthing body. This site of tension prompted me to ask myself generative questions: What is agency in light of these embodied situations? How do we recognize its forms? Is rhetorical agency among self-educating women always good? And how, when, and why should its limitations be renegotiated? I appreciate Owens's consistent choice to offer dual interpretations that honor the complexity of these sites of rhetorical production and consumption instead of hastily casting victims and perpetrators within the arena of medicalized births. For instance, when analyzing websites that host women's birth narratives, Owens refrains from villainizing commercial sites as irredeemably exploitative. She explains:

at first glance, websites' commodification of women's experiences could be read as damaging to women, or at least to their ability to use their experiences and stories for their own agency or for their own financial, intellectual, emotional, or other purposes—and it may be. But the commodification through copyright also may have a positive effect, in that the sites that copyright stories remain online, perhaps in part because of the financial stability lent by taking ownership of the stories. (100-101)

Notable in this excerpt is Owens's speculative tone, as evidenced through her use of non-declarative words such as "may" and "could." Such language is present throughout the project. I consider that rather than suggesting tentativeness, this speculative authorial stance invites readers to share, perhaps even codetermine, Owens's insights. Such an approach also lends credence to the intricate possibilities of "everyday" women's rhetorics that compose the confounding, if widely shared, experiences of childbirth.

Owens not only models how to expertly unpack tacit assumptions (Introduction), a move necessary to most feminist rhetorical scholars, she also engages with a "wider, messier circle of both influence on and output by individuals and across technologies" that is "critical for deep understanding" (137). Moments of close textual analysis ground key arguments, but it is Owens's

willingness to cast her net wide—transhistorically and across space and media—that adds a crucial dimensionality to the project. In this way her project will provide a useful model to other researchers working “messily” to span familiar and unfamiliar sites of rhetoric.

The potential limitation of not having examined Web 2.0 childbirth writing offers an opportunity, perhaps for others in the field if not Owens herself, to expand upon the useful work accomplished in this book. Another opportunity for development would be to more explicitly consider how ability, sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, education level, and other variances are manifest (or rendered mute) in these literacy practices. Admittedly, Owens notes that her “hearty data set” of 120 narratives, while representing “the full spectrum of birthing locations, attitudes, and experiences,” was otherwise less diverse than she would have expected (15). Do other types of childbirth writing exist? And, if so, would knowledge of these genres render this “full spectrum” only partial? Although I would have appreciated a more robust reflection on how and why the genres of childbirth writing examined in this book are taken up by white, middle-class women more than women of other demographics, I respect Owens’s critical work in understanding extant birth narratives. I also acknowledge her calls for further investigation into issues of diversity/inclusivity in relation to these genres. A single paragraph noting the absence of miscarriage and stillbirths in birth plans and on birth plan templates summons further, and needed, exploration. Much additional work awaits, and this project will hopefully serve as the foundation for new questions and sites of analysis.

Owens’s focus on everyday women’s experiences also opens up space for exploring feminist rhetorical scholarship’s relationship to advocacy and raises questions about who (all) our work should address. Marika Seigel has provided an admirable example of academic work (on the rhetoric of pregnancy, no less) specifically written for both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences. Should attention to rhetorical interventions written by everyday women prompt scholarly resistance to the exclusivity of academic publishing? I raise these questions, perhaps familiar to readers of *Peitho* (see Adams), not to suggest an oversight on Owens’s part in her artful and intellectually rigorous monograph, but to suggest how new work in the field of feminisms and rhetorics should urge more sustained attention to the conventions, expectations, audiences, and purposes of our work. With each new boundary-pushing piece of scholarship investigating the rhetorical and material realities of living women, our field is prompted to revisit the goals and uses of our writing.

*Writing Childbirth’s* exploration of writing motherhood deepens an expanding interest in rhetorics of motherhood (e.g., Buchanan; Hayden and O’Brien Hallstein). Owens’s consideration of birthing-women-as-consumers



and writers seeking agency complements recent work largely situated in Communication Studies that takes up similar lines of inquiry (see Demo, Borda, and Kroløkke). An invigorating work of feminist rhetorical and writing studies scholarship, *Writing Childbirth* will make an outstanding contribution to the graduate classroom, could benefit mature undergraduate readers, would be a truly useful addition to the bookshelf of any feminist rhetorical scholar, and should be required reading for those in our field actively exploring women's agency, rhetorics of health and medicine, and body/embodied rhetorics.

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