

Cairo,
January 2020

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I never imagined how polarizing talking about motherhood could be, and how much I would not want to speak on behalf of other women, or about men generally, or same-sex couples, motherless children, single mothers, or polyamorous families. Each fetus is as unique as the body it is gestating in and the specificity of the socio-economic status it will be born into, and yet I still find so much comfort in knowing about the shared struggles and joys ubiquitous beyond my specific experience. After months of struggling with several versions of this text, I have come to understand that the trouble wasn't in finding what to say (because there is so much to say) but rather in how to say it.

Early on, during the insomnia and heartburn delirium of my pregnancy, I started writing about a bottle of ouzo I had picked up at the Athens airport duty-free sometime in my first trimester. The label on the bottle had a picture of a carefree strawberry-blonde barefoot young woman twirling in a short white skirt and tight red top. When I turned the bottle around, I found a tiny silhouetted figure of a pregnant woman with a ponytail (the woman always has a ponytail) bringing a glass of wine to her mouth. This sad little woman, trying to enjoy a drink in the shadows, was unaware of the ominous red circle and bar across her belly. While I cannot read Greek, I knew very well that below the pictogram read some version of "It is safest not to drink while pregnant." In that first trimester, those two images seemed to describe the particular world of restrictions and lack of scientific evidence I had unsuspectingly fallen into and the one I didn't know I had left behind: the sex object versus the maternal figure. I was now being told that because I was carrying a child (my child, that I had chosen to have), I should accept that I had transformed officially into a silhouette trapped behind a red bar on the back of an ouzo bottle. And regardless of whether or not I identified with either the woman on the front of the bottle or believed

the warning on the back, this is how society in general sees women. (Or more importantly, women's *bodies*, because we have yet to fully concede that a woman can be something outside of what her body has the potential to do or provide.) I tried to imagine an icon representing a woman not defined by the limits and possibilities of her sex organs, who could read objective, evidence-based facts and make informed decisions that pertained to her personal life, her journey into motherhood, without the approval of whatever society she lived in.



Women are not trusted to make decisions for themselves. Not in the West, and definitely not in Cairo, where I accidentally became pregnant two months after deciding to live here instead of Los Angeles. A choice made between two urban sprawls with stark economic disparities, brutally hot dry summers, and oppressive (for different reasons) expectations of what women should be. I gave up trying to write about what it means to decide to have a child as an artist in a dysfunctional state after reading Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Rich's book, published in 1976, covers all aspects of how bearing children—something that should be a choice and not a requirement—is serious and difficult work whose control and responsibility has altogether been robbed from women. Rich does this through extensive historical, anthropological, sociological, medical, and even psychological research, managing to also weave personal biography and reflection into it. It is undoubtedly one of

the most important books I have ever read and should, in my opinion, be mandatory reading.

When I became pregnant, I felt the opposite of “empowered,” which is what all the fancy New Age expectancy books told me I should feel. I tried to find out what non-Western, non-English-speaking people read after they conceive. It appears to be a very niche genre of literature: the only texts I could find outside of Western cultural hegemony were anthropological studies or baby books that were a cross between a warning label (like the one on my ouzo bottle) and a consumerist guide to self-pampering on a six-figure salary that your husband is earning. And I felt like I was always being told to relax by these books, while simultaneously being told all the horrible things that could happen to me and my unborn child. *Empowered* was the precise feeling that felt repeatedly suppressed. It seemed to me that my income bracket would determine what kind of pregnancy I would have and that my doctor would ultimately determine the kind of birth I would have. The surrounding world, and the one accessed through the Internet, decides that you, as a pregnant woman, are so fragile, so feeble, so untrustworthy when it comes to the responsibility of childbearing that you *cannot* be told the truth about what is or isn’t actually harmful to you and your baby. Instead you are provided with infantilizing information and nearly impossible instructions to follow for how to care for yourself and the new life inside of you, with the end of every piece of advice inevitably being: you should consult your physician.

Patriarchy has made sure to rob women of as much free will as it possibly can because patriarchy is terrified by the power that women possess in this ability and experience. Yes, I am referring to patriarchy in such general terms because we all know it exists like a gas leak in the majority of societies. That said, after *much* digging, I did come across a pregnancy guide that describes (in non-infantilizing language) the known risks associated with everything from drug use to sex and exercise, and the reality of episiotomies and defecating during labor and delivery: *The Panic-Free Pregnancy* (2004) by Michael S. Broder.