

Emily Martin (1991) traces the gendered discourses and “hierarchical imagery” (498) at play within bio-medical descriptions of male and female sex cells. Working against the notion that scientific descriptions of bodily processes are neutral and objective, Martin demonstrates how tropes of masculinity and femininity are in fact embedded in the language used to describe female and male reproductive processes in medical textbooks. For example, sexist notions of feminine passivity and masculine activity are mapped onto female and male physiology respectively: an egg is represented as sitting and waiting for a sperm to reach it, while a sperm is depicted as being active – having the purpose or mission of reaching and penetrating the ovum. Not only are sperm attributed the characteristic of being active agents, they are also represented as possessing executive decision-making capacities, which enable them to “mak[e] an ‘existential decision’ to penetrate the egg” (491). In contrast to the independence and rationality of the sperm, the egg is positioned as essentially useless until it comes into a relation with a sperm, at which point it becomes valuable in that relationality. The egg is likened to “a dormant bride awaiting her mate’s magic kiss” (490), entirely dependent on the masculine sperm to bring it to life. Martin argues that these gendered stereotypes – bound up with a pervasive dualism in which women are positioned as less than men – persist in medical texts, despite developments in research that demonstrate the inaccuracy of these metaphors.

While Martin argues against the use of gendered medical metaphors, what remains unclear to me is how she wants narratives of biology and reproduction to be rewritten. While Martin suggests that portrayals of the egg and the sperm that make them out to be equally active partners in the process of reproduction – “more egalitarian, interactive metaphors” (501) – might be politically useful in promoting gender equality, she also indicates that using any metaphors that attribute personality or human characteristics to cells is problematic. Martin suggests that for

feminists, “becoming aware of when we are projecting cultural imagery onto what we study...will improve our ability to investigate and understand nature” (501). There might be a fundamental problem with this suggestion however, as it suggests that there lies a true or neutral understanding of nature outside of discourse and cultural meaning. Martin’s overarching argument rests upon the assumption that language is political, and yet she may be positing a position outside of language from which to deconstruct or make clear the representation politics of language – an objective site from which we can “becom[e] aware” (501) of language’s impacts on gender. Indeed, it seems as though Martin is implying that there is a possibility for unloaded or neutral language to be used to describe bodily functions. This raises the questions: what language ought to be used to describe biological processes within and between sexed bodies? Should feminist efforts be directed at achieving a neutral descriptive language and would this be politically productive?

[Word Count: 493]